THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BLACKGUARD

RAYMOND PATON

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BLACKGUARD

By

RAYMOND PATON

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THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A BLACKGUARD

AMONG OURSELVES, BOOK I

Pale lemon rays of afternoon sunshine, filtering through some luxuriously curtained lattice windows, illuminated the first floor of a house in St. James's Street, London.

Cold arrow-shafts of light gleaming across from different angles revealed exquisite panelled oak, glorious old pictures, and some rare china.

Even whilst the light was failing, it appeared to concentrate its last efforts for effect upon a large powdered blue Ming bowl, heaped up and overflowing with early primroses. Beside such delicate yellow shades, the orange-red sheets of an unusually long telegram, which the Marquis de Villemont regarded with a quizzically puzzled stare, appeared coarse and out of the colour scheme.

"Extraordinary wire," commented the Marquis, "can't understand it myself; seems important. Must have cost him something to send a telegram of such a length."

An amused grin overspread the Marquis de Villemont's face, upon recollecting how his friend, Lord Tony Peversdoun, was perpetually preaching the necessity of cutting down expenses in small things.

"Not big things," his lordship was wont to shout excitedly, "but small things. Its an age of blood-suckers, sappers, and caterpillars, perpetually eating the small green leaves until only the tree trunk remains."

A footstep which had attained the highest perfection towards noiselessness, through custom, entered the room.

"Carter!"

"My lord."

"Any answer to those three letters I gave you for The Ralton?"

"Yes, my lord. Professor McGrath, Sir Andrew Calmath, and the Duc de Choiseuil were there finishing a game of bridge in the card-room of the club, and sent down word they will be round immediately."

"Tea for four, Carter!"

"Yes, my lord."

"Lemon for Professor McGrath, he doesn't take milk with his tea. That's the bell; they've arrived."

Carter glided noiselessly over the Persian rugs in the direction of the door, with something of the grace of a lizard who has lingered too long in the sun.

"Wonder if Carter would understand this telegram?" mused the Marquis.

"Extraordinary man, he understands most things."

"Always reminds me of some species of animal that glides through life, knowing his own business perfectly, utterly indifferent to anything or anyone else. Surrounding itself with a cold chill that would give one the shudders, had it not been cultivated to a high sphere of eclecticism.

"Would it be a lizard, or a snake, I wonder? Anyway I'll get the Professor to diagnose him for me some day."

Hereupon the manservant, whose species appeared difficult to catalogue, noiselessly opened the door and three men sauntered into the room.

The world appeared to have treated all three of them exceedingly well.

They somehow conveyed an atmosphere of thoroughly enjoying the world they found themselves in, as men are enabled to do when distinction has come to them whilst youth still remains.

"What does this urgent summons mean, my dear Lucien?" demanded Sir Andrew Calmath.

"Don't say you have just made your will and require us as witnesses, if not legatees," suggested McGrath.

"I should hate to put my signature to such a document, but if you insist upon my benefiting subsequently by any of your household works of art, I confess to a secret but recurrent yearning for that powdered blue Ming bowl."

"Hush!" commanded the young Duc de Choiseuil solemnly. "Cannot you see he is convulsively grasping a

fairly lengthy-looking telegram, with fingers that clutch and twitch, or if they don't they ought to. It's a shattered love romance, the last beloved has left Lucien, or, perhaps, the last but one, or possibly a third fair future victim."

"Alas," continued the young Duc, "I am convinced she gives the date of her flight, details of the passages secured for herself and her new lover, in a fast-going ocean liner. Long messages imploring Lucien upon no account to follow her. Whole paragraphs pleading for forgiveness, because she felt herself compelled against her better judgement to take all the jewels and dresses Lucien has presented to her during a most expensive liaison, which she now regrets.

"I am willing to bet she concludes with the pious hope that should they meet in future, Lucien will never appear to know her for the sake of any children she may have, to whom the jewels will descend as innocent heirlooms rendered doubly valuable by reason of the ruin of their mother."

The Marquis chuckled, "Merry hearts," he answered, "sit down every one of you, you're all wrong."

Calmath groaned. "I knew it," he murmured. "Lucien has received an imperative and last demand for the income-tax, feels himself to be irretrievably ruined, and wishes us to elucidate to him the subtlest mysteries that inquisitorial document is capable of containing, or failing that to administer last rites."

"Aptly and nicely put," murmured Lucien, appreciatively, "but so far wide of the mark."

"You need not wait, Carter, we will help ourselves to tea."

"Lemon for me," exclaimed the Professor, wagging a stumpy forefinger by way of admonition.

"There are two here for you, and that ought to be a sufficient quantity. For your own sake you oughtn't to have more than four cups."

"Teacakes there, crumpets under that cover. You fellows remember," continued their host, "how astonished we were when Peverdoun informed us, some months ago, that he had fallen in love with a beautiful old place called St. Freeda's Priory, in Gloucestershire, and had bought it."

"I do remember," grunted the Professor, "and I declared at the time that it was disgusting that a man,

already possessing a castle, and goodness knows how many other houses scattered all over England, should still continue to acquire more property."

"I consider it sheer greed," Professor McGrath grumbled on, "an insane lust for possession."

"Now I presume that ridiculously long telegram, resembling the first instalment of a woman's novel after she has been suddenly attacked by inspiration, is to inform us that the place has been burned down."

De Villemont smiled indulgently at the Professor, who had ceased to rail at other people's extravagance, and was comforting himself with crumpets.

"Far from having lost anything by reason of fire or otherwise, he appears to have gained a strangely mysterious possession."

"A wife," groaned Sir Andrew, "a wife at last, and she will hate all his bachelor friends. Farewell for ever to happy week-ends."

"Now, where do I seem to remember that name St. Freeda's Priory, surely in connection with some great musician I have met."

"You are all wrong," announced De Villemont calmly.

"Will you read that telegram?" bellowed the Professor, after gulping down the last half of his crumpet.

"Perhaps you fellows will be able to understand it," queried their host, "for I'm hanged if I can, but this is what it says":

"Freeda's Priory,
"Friday.

"By means of a tiny piece of mulberry-coloured silk that attracted my attention because it appeared to grow by itself out of a solid stone wall, I have been enabled to make here the most wonderful discovery of the age. I have found a hidden secret place so beautiful and packed with treasures that it absolutely defies all description

"Nobody around here could have known of its existence, and I certainly never purchased it when I paid a quite moderate sum for St. Freeda's Priory.

"The rarest treasure of all I consider is a manuscript written within the last few bygone years, dealing with a life so strange and wonderful that I cannot read it unmoved, nor can I read it alone.

"Two of the men I am asking you to bring down figure in the pages of this extraordinary manuscript, and I shall

never be content until you are all present at St. Freeda's and can hear it and judge for yourselves, providing indeed that you are able to judge it at all, for I confess that I am utterly unable to do so myself.

"I am sending both my cars to town to-morrow to fetch you all down for the week-end. They will arrive 10 to 10.30 a.m. The second car I am sending for De Choiseuil's special charge and the lady attendant.

"Yours impatiently until we meet, Peversdoun."

"Extraordinary telegram," observed Sir Andrew Calmath, "most remarkable; and wouldn't a trunk call have been cheaper?" he added as an afterthought.

"You can't have a telephone miles away in the Cotswold Hills," objected De Villemont. "Anyway, I suppose you fellows are all coming along."

Professor McGrath unfolded a large pair of tortoiseshell-rimmed eye-glasses and glared through them at everybody in turn. The worthy Professor presented the appearance, as he sat in his chair, of a large owl preparing to hoot at the world in general from the hollow of an oak-tree.

"I object to two things," announced the Professor defiantly. "I shall resent it most deeply if any misguided person has ventured to express any opinion of either my life or works, particularly after hiding it away in a room, and by such means inducing an ever credulous posterity to accept it for gospel."

"Perhaps you are not mentioned, McGrath," reasoned the others.

"I trust not, indeed," snapped the Professor.

"My second objection is the presence of ladies, who will completely spoil an otherwise enjoyable bachelor week-end party."

"Pray Raoul, who is the woman referred to as your especial charge? To say nothing of the lady attendant."

The Duc de Choiseuil laughed.

"Oh, that needn't bother you," he replied lightly. "One cannot be described as a lady, whilst the other will, doubtless, be accommodated somewhere in the servants' quarters."

"Right," declared the Professor, who seemed greatly relieved at the absence of ladies, "then I go for one."

"We all go," chimed in Sir Andrew. "A secret chamber packed with treasures—never heard of such a thing in my life. I wonder what sort of treasures. Lucky Tony,

verily it is true in his case, 'to him that hath more shall be given'."

"It appears to me," observed the Duc de Choiseuil, "these treasures have not been given, but merely concealed, probably the result of loot in some bygone and even less scrupulous age than the one we are at present living in."

After a while the guests departed, arranging to meet the ten o'clock upon the following morning and proceed by car to St. Freeda's Priory.

* * * *

Late that evening, Carter, the silent and enigmatical manservant, lifted the powdered blue Ming bowl with exquisite care and prepared to substitute tulips of a tomato-coloured red in place of the primroses with which it had lately been filled.

Over the top of an illustrated sporting journal his master observed him quietly without appearing to do so.

Wonderful taste that man has, mused his master; always does exactly the right thing. He knows perfectly well that primroses would be an entirely wrong note in colour for the new candle-shades, and yes, of course, there is the same shade in silk running between the lace for the dessert epergnes.

Handles that bowl with all the loving care of a connoissieur, too.

"Carter!"

"Yes, my lord."

"I want you to pack my things and take them along with you in my car to-morrow morning. There will be no room and more than enough baggage to carry, as it is, in the cars Lord Peversdoun is sending up. We shall want the car in any case for the return journey."

"Very good, my lord, to what address have I to go?"

"St. Freeda's Priory, Gloucestershire."

Suddenly the blue Ming bowl he was holding dropped from Carter's hands. Its precious powdered fragments lay scattered upon the polished oak floor.

Carter's face had become very pale, but otherwise he appeared calm.

The Marquis de Villemont sprang up from his chair and viewed the total wreck of his costly bowl with wrathful amazement. He was probably feeling deeper anger and irritation than he had ever before experienced in his calm and well-ordered life.

"Damn it all, Carter, what the devil are you dreaming about, do you know what you have done?"

The question was doubtless futile, but the owner of the once lovely bowl was very upset, and did not stop to choose words.

"I am very sorry, my lord, I am deeply grieved it should have happened."

"Damned careless, Carter; you knew how I treasured it —and you've never broken anything before"—his master wound up somewhat lamely.

"Never, my lord, and I ask your pardon for what I have done."

"Well, don't stand staring at it, sweep it up—I can't bear to look at it."

"Yes, my lord, and if you please, my lord, I should like to say that it is within my power to replace this valuable bowl I have just broken."

The wrath of Carter's master blazed up anew.

"Oh, for heaven's sake don't talk as if it were a two shilling bowl you can buy in a china shop. Replace it—don't talk nonsense; there probably isn't another one like it in existence; it was priceless."

"No, my lord."

"Gave himself away there," mused the Marquis, as the man removed the pieces and silently slid out of the room.

Yes, by jove, for the first time since he has been here, showed his infernal ignorance—replace it indeed. What rot: the fellow has actually taken away my appetite for dinner.

Punctually at a quarter-to-nine the following morning, De Villemont sauntered into a sunlit room for breakfast.

He suddenly stood immovable, scarcely able to believe the evidence of his own eyesight.

Upon the outspread table stood two perfect powdered blue Ming bowls.

Tenderly, and with growing amazement, he turned them round in the morning sunlight.

Both bowls were genuine, perfect, being even finer specimens than the one he had lost upon the previous evening.

"Colouring superb," he muttered, "antiquity undoubted. Well, I'm damned, and that's about all I can say."

Carter silently entered the room, immaculate and imperturbable as usual.

He carried two breakfast dishes beneath their silver covers, upon a tray.

"Carter?"

"My lord!"

"Where did these two bowls come from?"

Carter had deftly placed the breakfast dishes before his master, who appeared to be indulging in the unusual caprice of allowing his breakfast to get cold.

"I have ventured to replace what I had the misfortune to break yesterday, my lord."

The Marquis de Villemont remained for some time in thought.

"Will you allow me to purchase these bowls from you, Carter?"

"Asking your pardon, my lord, they are mine to give, if you will do me the honour to accept them, but I cannot sell them."

"Carter, you know they are very valuable—they are worth a small fortune."

"Quite so, my lord, and if I may say so, more appropriate and in keeping here, than they were in the two rooms I rent in Shepherd's Market."

Again there was short silence; then De Villemont appeared to pull himself together with an effort.

"Carter, I must ask your pardon for the way I spoke to you last night, it was inexcusable."

"Oh, my lord, please——"

"And, Carter, I must thank you for a very valuable and extremely beautiful present that I shall always treasure more than I can tell you."

"Thank you, my lord," murmured Carter, as he moved silently out of the room.

The breakfast remained untouched.

"Well, I'm damned!" ejaculated the master of Carter for the second time that morning.

* * * *

Within the beautiful old oak-beamed refectory of St. Freeda's Priory, used as a sitting-room, five men stood and stared at a small fragment of mulberry-coloured silk that appeared to grow by itself upon the face of a solid stone wall.

There it remained in much the same way that a wallflower will grow from the front of an old wall.

Yet there was this difference: a tiny crevice can always be seen where the wallflower has taken root.

In the present instance no crack or crevice of any sort could be discovered.

Four of the men present tried to remove the small piece of silk in turn, but their efforts were unavailing.

"That fact also attracted my attention," affirmed Tony Peversdoun, "but I had been several months in possession of St. Freeda's before I noticed it at all."

"Show us this treasure chamber now, Tony," the others urged, "and unfold the secret. We are all devoured with curiosity to see it."

Tony Peversdoun shook his head and tapped a thick manuscript enclosed within an old leather cover which he hugged beneath one arm.

"No," he said, "that would spoil it all and would be equivalent to putting the cart before the horse.

"I will show you fellows what I have to show you afterwards, but I mean to read this to you first; then," he added thoughtfully, "I don't think myself you will ask anything else once I have started.

"The manuscript is divided into five books.

"The least of the books is written by another hand for a reason you will learn.

"Every evening before and after dinner I will read it to you all in this room. It is named 'The Autobiography of a Blackguard'."

"Whose life does it deal with?" asked Sir Andrew Calmath.

"An artist, a genius, one whom you must have known quite well," Tony answered in a curiously gentle voice. "It is Michael Caviol's life."

"Michael Caviol," Calmath almost shouted, "the glorious violinist? Why, I have conducted orchestras for him heaps of times."

Tony Peverdoun nodded.

"The greatest violinist of this age," continued Calmath, "who was murdered by the Bolshevists in Russia. "

Tony Peversdoun answered almost sadly, so his guests thought:

"Yes, he was the greatest artist of his age, but this manuscript will tell you whether he was murdered in Russia or not, for it is the vivid and living truth of a man's life such as I have never read."

We took our seats around the old stone fireplace, and this is what Lord Tony Peversdoun read to us:

THE BOOK OF MICHAEL

Here, in St. Freeda's Priory, the exquisite old monastery dating back as far as the Plantagenets, nestling in the hills of Gloucestershire, which my fame and money enabled me to purchase, I have found behind the great arched and richly-carven stone fireplace a secret and perfect hiding place. It was then I commenced to write from time to time and safely to hide away from the sight of all men, this strange record of a life which even now, when it has become an accomplished thing of fame, knowledge and history, often appears to me to be like unto the glowing dream of some fairy-tale.

A species of legend without parallel, or so it seems at such times when I unconsciously compare my life's happenings with others in the world whom I have encountered and lived amidst.

In setting forth my most strange story, and, whilst endeavouring to reconcile my own thoughts in relation to the actual facts of my life, I am oft-times lost in amazement.

I have been enabled to gather with full hands everything that art, success, and riches could give (together with a world adoration not by any means good for me) during my life up to the present.

I shall never know in what measure that life was shaped through the terrible blow dealt by means of a brandy-bottle frenziedly grasped in a drunkard's hand, one night in Marseilles.

Perhaps that alone altered all my thoughts and future life. Neither shall I ever really learn how the most wondrous and dangerous possession in the whole world, found within the rough pocket of a sailor's barbaric coat, contributed towards the great fame—I would oft-times have exchanged—or endowered the brilliant pageant of the years with deeds which I have no other choice than to bitterly regret.

Such thoughts and actions oft-times trampling and wrecking the pathway whereon had been flung, carelessly heaped in profusion, the choicest flowers and favours of

the world, the aftermath of which leaves only the remorse that is abiding and does not pass away.

Very much will be pardoned to those who have greatly loved, so that even I may have my measure of forgiveness.

Looming through the great golden balances of fate wherein I may be tried and found wanting, comes to me the remembrance that I alone of all time and in all the earth was confronted, though but in a dream more real than all the realities, with an angel holding within his hand a power greater than a flaming sword.

He offered me the choice, yet withal the unswerving and unalterable choice, between perfect art and perfect love.

Not both—but either one, or the other, alone, as I should decide.

Such a decree and its ensuing decision might well have caused a stronger brain than mine to confuse the issue of that which was greatest with that which was least.

Whenever my footsteps faltered it may well have been through entering strange and forbidden paths where none before were permitted to tread.

When the little Princess, who has been and will ever be, the absorbing love of my life, left me, voluntarily, and went away from St. Freeda's, I knew, amidst the depths of my despair, that she would never return.

Her world would have shrunk in horror had a great aristocrat mated with an artiste. It is pre-ordained in the world of fashion that such a union, sanctioned or unsanctioned, must never take place.

Passion must be discounted. What is love compared with respectability? what is the holiness of love to the outside world, under such circumstances? Absolutely nothing. The mental, bodily, and spiritual happiness of two beings perfectly made for each other becomes a matter of no account.

The entire summing up of a social verdict would be contained in two contemptuous words—absolutely degrading.

There are two varyingly great sins in the social decalogue that have a special pre-eminence of their own.

The greatest of these is a mésalliance; a secondary one, is the marked undesirability of loving your neighbour, or indeed of loving anyone at all.

The results of such a social religion are appalling, and

it is small comfort to consider that I am not the only sufferer from its tenets. Therefore it came about in that time when I was forsaken and alone I started to write my strange autobiography.

Later on, when it was becoming more tender, more intimate, a very part of myself, I continued to write it through the long days of an English summer at St. Freeda's Priory.

I had found a place to conceal it there from all eyes, from all men—yes, and especially women.

The freehold of St. Freeda's belongs to me, and the lands around it, for ever and ever, and I have taken good care that it shall never pass into the hands or the keeping of strangers.

I sometimes think that St. Freeda's is a costly and worthy setting to a missal that is sacred to me, and one which the world at large, or even a portion of it, will never be enabled to read.

Whenever I think of a stranger perusing the MS. of my autobiography it has the power to bring a smile to my face.

None know better than myself that the world is full, yes, and verily overflowing, with Thomases, both male and female.

Some wounds are too deep and too sacred to have the proving fingers of doubt laid upon them.

Perfect love knows nothing about doubt, any more than perfect art knows anything save itself.

Genius, seldom, if ever in life, can realize or recognize itself.

Accordingly it comes about that it is unable to describe or record anything of its own wonders, upon an earth full of marvellous things, alike priceless and too intangible to be explained, even to such inhabitants of the planet as are genuinely anxious for information.

My life, which up to the present time has been so full of colour, was not lacking in this particular respect when my first remembrance goes back to the little curio shop, No. 79, at the corner of the Rue Notte in Marseilles.

I possessed, before I could remember them, a French father and a Scotch mother, neither of them apparently being able to speak the other's languge.

Rumour handed down the fact to me that my parents had spent most of their life in perpetual quarrels.

I used to wonder how they managed to convey the one to the other all the bitterness that appeared to dwell in their hearts, unless anger supplied a common tongue understood by both of them.

My father, whom I learned had died abroad in Russia, only preceded my mother by a year. It was after her death that the strange figure of my Scotch grandmother loomed larger and larger into my life.

She appeared in the Rue Notte, to take over the curio shop and myself at one end the same time.

I used the term loomed large in regard to my grandmother, for indeed she appeared to me, a tiny little fellow that I was, to be a veritable giantess.

She stood fully six feet, bony, angular, and although thin as a skeleton was possessed of immense strength, for I remember her lifting great tables, chairs, to say nothing of huge oak boxes, with scarcely an effort.

As my puny childish hands and shoulders could not shift any of these articles, even to the point of making them move ever so little, I came to regard her as one of supernatural strength, a sort of female genie.

Her hard, piercing, black eyes were like the eyes of the stuffed hawk which adorned a glass case in one corner of the shop.

Her hair must have once been raven-black, in her youth, provided she ever had been young, which I always disbelieved at this time.

At the age at which I first remember her, she must have been in the region of seventy.

Her head was streaked with broad bands of white hair alternating with the black, oddly suggesting to me the long peppermint sticks which I occasionally bought in the Rue Raoul.

Some misguided customer, as if to purposely lay a trap for my childish innocence, had sold in the shop one day a picture painted by I know not whom, depicting the "Witch of Endor". The artist had transmitted to the canvas a semi-nude hag of fearsome aspect, whose bony naked arms and legs were outstretched in fearsome malediction.

Her long hair of streaky black and white whirled about her without concealing her withered naked bosoms, which she appeared to be shaking in the eyes of the spectator.

A long coloured rag appeared around the woman's neck in the picture, which might have been omitted for

anything it concealed by way of conforming to the proprieties.

This coloured garment only appeared to differ by way of a small detail from the Scotch plaid shawl my grand'-mère invariably wore around her scraggy shoulders to the intense and lasting amusement of the people of Marseilles.

The picture of the "Witch of Endor" ceased to have any fascination for me from the moment my grand'mère asked me in the strange harsh lingo—she spoke half French, half Scotch—what I thought of the picture.

Innocently enough and in good faith I replied that it was a wonderful likeness of her should she ever go to the bath.

Out shot two bony arms, one after the other, and smote me hard and fast.

"Yer de'il, yer de'il," she shouted, "wi yer face o' a Raphael angel, and yer mind o' a Marseilles quay bawd, away yer scalp, Méchant, débris d'hospital——"

"I'm not," I shouted back, "but I will be, if you beat me till you kill me." Whereupon she stopped.

"I dinna ken wha' to mak o' yer ma bairn—*vous êtes un ange, mais non—un diable.* Ach! damn yer."

I did not wait for any more of her reflections, wisely considering she might develop again into action.

I wandered out of the curio shop along the quays to the harbour, that never ending source of colour and delight for me. Colour was always a passion of my life, even from those childish days.

The brilliant stacks of fresh flowers overflowing every kiosk, the glittering endless shipping, the bales of merchandise, every uniform, every coloured workgirl's blouse, had its charm for me as I passed.

Very often I was sent down to the harbour and quays, sometimes to meet a traveller, often to intercept a sailor who had brought from afar some of the lovely china and curios, and direct them to 79, Rue Notte.

The pick of what came from many ends of the earth eventually found their way to my grandmother's curio-shop, which would one day be mine.

Sometimes, when I grew a little older, she would let me bargain with the customers and sell to them in the shop. "Yer face helpits yer," she would say, "ask double

the price div yer ken, *et mon Dieu l'occasion fait le larron pour moi*—damn yer."

My bargaining always seemed to thrive.

Among other customers came two artists; one brought an old box of coral and pearl from the far East, the other, two china bowls from Persia. Both wanted to paint me, but I was so taken aback by the unexpectedness and unusual nature of the offer that I forgot to wrap up the bowls.

My grand'mère, unaware of the first artist's offer, glared only upon the purchasers of the Persian bowls.

"Div yer ken what yer saying mon, paint the bairn, why?"

The artist spoke in polite French and gently urged that even famous people oft-times paid him a great deal of money to paint them.

"Sic fools wud pay for onythink," retorted my ancestress ungraciously. "Maybe yer wud paint him, and no sell him after, and come to me to buy fra yer, so I wud hae twa o' his damned faces in the shop, instead o' the ane."

The artist laid his hand caressingly upon my head, and smiled. The situation seemed to amuse him.

"Would that be such a very dreadful thing?" he urged smilingly.

"*Le bon Dieu* only gives a very beautiful thing every now and again, so it is only reasonable to suppose He loves to see copies of His choicest works, otherwise how do you explain the flowers."

"What is your name, petit?"

"Michael," I said.

"Very appropriate, only Michael——"

"Caviol," I rejoined.

"Michael Caviol," he nodded.

"Well madam, I wish to paint him for one of the angels I am painting in the newly added chapel of the Cathedral."

"Angel," scoffed my grand'mère wrathfully, looking even more like a Gorgon than was her wont to do, as she flapped her coloured plaid shawl much like the wings of the *chauve-souris* that beat against my window at night, when I went into the country.

"He is no angel yer ken, but a de'il all through. I'm a de'il too."

"Ah!" remarked the artist thoughtfully.

"Go awa," commanded my lady grandmother, "yer'll

no paint the blasted bairn. Damn him and damn yer."

The artist laughed lightly. "Little brother," he said, "we seem to share this curse equally between us."

As he departed with his two Persian bowls, I heard him say jestingly in French to his companion that he never knew the little Saint Michael had a dragon to keep him company.

My grandmother was not however, always a being of harshness and horror.

Like most other people, if one only learns to discover it, she had an entirely different side to her disposition.

When the curio-shop was closed in the early evenings, and the quaint inside wooden shutters were fastened with their little bells attached which I always associated with the muffin man—I had once seen in England—we would repair to the back parlour behind the shop.

It was lined with quaint old oak beams, in addition it possessed a wide, open steel fireplace of a long bygone day; and in this sanctum my grandmother would become an entirely different person.

After cooking our evening meal—for that little room, still so full of memories for me was half-kitchen, half-sitting-room—my grandmother would seem to unbend, and preparatory to doing so would always place four things upon the table.

A greasy double pack of cards and markers, a tall stout bottle labelled Cognac, which she told me was her medicine and which I always believed, thirdly a glass, and lastly, the most innocent thing of all, a jug of water.

After the atmosphere of the old curio-shop, packed to overflowing with its china, its old silver, furniture, pictures, curios of every shade, shape, size, and nationality, the little back parlour was always cosy and comfortable.

My little garret where I slept upstairs opened off this room upon the one side, after a flight of shallow wooden steps, my grandmother's sleeping apartment off the opposite side of the room.

At the end was a small passage, shut off, leading across a stone courtyard at the back, up some rickety ladder steps to a loft, once used for hay, over a tiny stable, which had long since ceased to be used for such a purpose.

The loft contained bass wrappings and cloths to pack furniture in, old frames, broken litters of odds and ends,

and against one wall, so much glass, both broken and whole, from picture frames that it almost, through the uncertain light coming from the one small window of the loft, resembled ice stacked at the side of a Russian road.

In the days that were to come, this little loft was destined to play no small part in my after life, in more ways than one. I have often blessed it, as affording me a shelter and privacy that I could never have found anywhere else in the entire house.

Yes, I have blessed it solemnly and lovingly, for that small shabby loft, smelling of bass wrappings, oil, varnish, and furniture polish, was a sure refuge for me, in fact made it possible for me to lay the foundation for what I was afterwards to become.

Yet I run on apace and too fast, as one is always apt to do when dealing with one's early childhood days.

Back to the cosy little parlour after shutting-up time, and my grandmother's happier and more human aspect.

The game of cards she invariably played with me was bezique. Sometimes the Polish variety, sometimes the French, but always bezique.

Occasionally this mild recreation would be varied by a species of fortune telling, of which my grand'mère struck me as being quite an adept.

With what eagerness she played bezique, how triumphantly she shouted sequence, and promptly marked 250 with a claw-like hand. How grandly she rose to the rare occasion of a score of 500 for double bezique, and yet when with a child's shrewdness I had sacrificed everything in the game to attain a like high object, how she would mutter something which sounded strangely like "bloody little pig".

I always hope I somehow misunderstood her about the employment of this phrase, which, indeed, might have occurred in connection with the large dose of "*medicine*" she invariably resorted to if ever I declared a high call or stood any chance of winning a game.

And so the little evenings droned on quite happily, so cosy and very comfortable, and during those sittings I began to entertain quite an affection for my strange grandmother, and oft-times I would go to the extent of giving her my childish kisses, boy-like throwing both my arms around her neck.

I could not, however, refrain from observing that these

childish advances were welcomed with much more warmth after she had taken more of her "medicine" than usual.

Upon one occasion, I remember being positively alarmed.

After having fervently kissed both my "bonnie e'en", as she called them, and solemnly blessed them (she usually damned them in the curio-shop) she suddenly and unexpectedly burst into a torrent of weeping and self-reproaches.

I tried to comfort her as well as I could, by pressing my mouth to her cheek, imploring her to tell me if she was ill. I thought indeed, she must be so, for the fumes of the "medicine" she had taken in such unusual quantities that evening were strong and potent, they made me cough, and even seemed to get into my eyes.

Still shedding stray tears, and hiccups appearing to rend her instead of a cough, from time to time, she mumbled that she was a wicked auld—I think she mentioned a female dog, but that by the power of Satan, she would tell my fortune, and that I was to watch well and list to what she told me, as she was inspired that night.

More "medicine" followed, undiluted upon this occasion with any water whatsoever.

"Deal yer limb," she cried, "deal, and the devil for us both."

After much dealing, shuffling, re-shuffling, and laying out the cards and laying on of her hands, the *dénouement* was, to say the least of it, startling.

My grandam staggered unsteadily to her feet, towering over the table, swaying in a most curious way, which I attributed to the emotions aroused alike by the fortune, and the coincidence that she happened to be inspired.

"God above us," she muttered thickly, "it's first a murderous coward's blow ga'en when the senses are dark——"

"Cut," she commanded.

I obeyed.

"A death," she crooned, "a death."

"Cut and shuffle."

Again I obeyed; the pungent odour of that most powerful "medicine" seemed to beat upon the table under the swinging oil lamp.

The twin odours of oil and "medicine" appeared to comingle and pervade the whole place.

My grandmother started speaking again in a sort of

mumbling recitative, almost as if she were intoning responses at church.

"Strange gift from a foreign part, a verra wicked gift, so dangerous that it will make ye, make ye—Ah michty God, it's *supernatural, supernatural,* it will make ye, Na-na-I canna bear it. Shut it out, what wud ye wi' devils' magic, shut it out I say, damn yer, damn yer all."

Whereupon my grandam, overcome by such a load of inspiration, fell flat upon the floor.

She was too heavy for me to raise, yet as I tried, she struck at me and shrieked at me to go to bed.

After putting a pillow under her head, and getting upon a chair to turn out the lamp, I went up to my little attic-room marvelling at the strange and unusual events of the evening, and wondered vaguely when real inspirations came to people, whether or no they could be considered unmixed blessings.

Shortly, after the regrettable incident just recorded, my grand'mère, considering that she required a change for the sake of her health, managed to combine pleasure with business and took me to Paris, where two sales of curios she wished to attend, were taking place.

The little curio-shop in the Rue Notte was accordingly closed and securely locked and barred, and we set off for Paris.

It was during that, for me, memorable week, we lodged in Paris over a café somewhere off the Montmartre, that I experienced in my small and hitherto uneventful life, the first thrill of joy, the earliest ecstasy of emotion I can remember.

Even to-day the thought of it has the power to move me strangely, so the impressions of one eventful afternoon in a lonely life must have abided with me and remained for ever part of my very being from that time forth.

The sale-rooms of the dealers were hot and unpleasantly stuffy; they had the effect of making me feel heavy and sleepy.

Mirth would occasionally prevail, when my grand'mère shot out her bony witch-like arms to enforce her bids, whilst her brilliantly coloured Scotch plaid shawl seemed to afford unending amusement to the Parisians who had apparently never before encountered anything like this garment.

Finally I was bidden to amuse myself the best way I

could, to stay about the vicinity of the café, and not get lost, not to eat too many chocolates, burst myself with limonade, or drown myself with sweet café noir, all of which things were bad for little boys, according to the belief of my grandmother.

So I sat downstairs in a corner of our little café of the beaux-arts, sipping a long glass of café noir. The patron was washing up glasses the other side of the little wooden shutter. It was late in the afternoon, all the customers had left, save one. He appeared to be asleep. His flushed face was tilted back at what he imagined to be the most comfortable angle, in one corner of the pew-like wooden seats.

A half-consumed plateful of spagetti, and two full-sized empty wine bottles stood upon the table in front of him, surrounded by a miniature desert of dropped cigarette ash.

I was separated from him by the breadth of the little room, but from a similar wooden pew wherein I sat, I regarded him thoughtfully.

He must have been a man of about thirty-five years, with a tousled head of black curly hair, beginning to grow grey in places.

His was a striking face and would have been a beautiful one, yet it appeared to be strangely marred by some indefinable thing or other.

I was too young then to understand the hall-marks of drink and dissipation.

I gradually ceased to observe him any further and had forgotten all about him before I had finished my café noir, so intently was I interested with a coloured puzzle I had purchased upon the Boulevardes outside. A little coloured bagatelle board, enclosed in glass, with tiny coloured peas, which somehow refused to roll into the highest numbers, so that, despite all my coaxing, the highest places of honour were not often to be obtained.

That little puzzle might have served as an illustration of life, had I put known.

Whilst I was still absorbed in this problem, the man had wakened up, undone a long leather case beside him, and taken out a violin and bow.

I was aroused by him softly and deftly tuning the instrument.

He relighted a cigarette, stuck it rakishly in the corner of his mouth, and began to play.

From that moment, everything in my tiny life became altered.

How strange that in that first moment of a child's wonderment and awakening, the meaningless words mumbled by my grandmother from a bible at night, under the smoking oil-lamp at home, should have flashed through the brain. Something about "if ever the silver cord be loosed"; the silver cord indeed seemed to me to be his bow impelled over the strings by a supple wrist.

I seemed to be aware of the colour of a red-gold violin, possessing only four vibrating strings, and yet from them came wonderful chords, rainbow dripping arpeggios, thrilling the ear, overflowing the senses with every strange emotion, perfect in tone and colour, marvellous, unexplainable.

Was the bow glued to the strings?

No, it wound in great lengths something in the nature of elastic.

How swiftly and almost imperceptibly the well-shaped fingers with the dirty finger nails moved over the finger board of the instrument, whilst the ash from the cigarette dropped all over the *f* hole of the instrument, underneath it.

I never knew how many minutes that flood of perfect runs and gorgeous double stopping lasted.

He suddenly ceased playing, and was about to put the violin away again.

His amazement, when I advanced out of my darkened corner, told me at once he had believed himself to be alone in the room.

"M'sieur," I faltered, for my heart was beating, and my voice sounded with a sort of unsteady catch in it, "M'sieur, for the love of heaven, do not put it away, please, oh please play to me again."

He looked at me curiously. "Hein, a little one in the stalls eh?"

"Why mon brave, you look to me to be uncertain whether to cry or no; so John Sebastian Bach still has power to touch the heart, if anybody in this cursed world possesses such a thing," and he laughed.

"You love the violin? Yes, yes, I can see."

"Until to-day I never heard one."

"What think you of it little——"

"Divine——"

Again he laughed and looked at me amusedly.

"Think you, little one, it is worth the study of a whole lifetime."

"Yes, yes, yes," I cried.

"Why mon petit?"

"It is—it is," I started.

"Yes, what would you say; don't hurry to tumble your words all over each other."

"So you think then?"

"It is the only thing in the world worth doing.

He regarded me intently for awhile and laughed."

"I wonder," he said, "I wonder."

"Would you like to hear wild Hungarian dances?"

I shook my head.

"What then?"

"More of he whom you played."

"Sebastian Bach?"

"Yes!"

"A good catholic classic taste," he laughed again. "You are a strange child, a droll."

I crossed over to the fire which was nearly out, and he played most exquisitely to me, what I afterwards knew to be Bach's "Chaçonne".

I think I foresaw all my future in the dying-out embers of that fire whilst he played.

Strange resolutions for a child to form to those grand and lovely chords.

The kingdom, the power, and the glory of one's future life hovers over us sometimes; perhaps it was encircling me even then.

The indefinite awakened yearning of ten-year-old Michael Caviol, interwoven to the perfect music of Sebastian Bach.

When he had ceased playing what I dimly realized was the most wondrous music I had heard hitherto in my brief life, he unscrewed the seemingly magic bow and definitely put the violin away.

A curious sense of desolation came over me, the corresponding surging of my heart and brain seemed to cease. All the brightness faded from the room and everything in life appeared growing dark and empty, like the vanishing fire in the grate.

Instinct told me it would be useless to ask my strange and gifted acquaintance to play to me any more.

Perhaps he would talk to me and tell me all about the violin, tell me some of the secrets of what had become the most beautiful thing in life, for me.

With this purpose in my mind, I quietly drew the nearest of the little wooden pews in front of the fire and gently plucked him by the sleeve of his coat.

"So you want to talk now, well why not? But first of all, mon enfant, the fire, like everything else in the world, needs care and attention, otherwise we lose it, hein?"

Without any thought of consulting the proprietor, he promptly commandeered three wooden logs out of the old copper box beside the fireplace, crumpled up a copy of the Matin lying upon a table, and by the way of the greatest extravagance of all, emptied the remaining lumps of beet sugar from a bowl reposing upon the table at which he had eaten, crammed them all into the grate and set light to the collection.

Very soon we had the cheerful crackle of logs, and the pleasant accid smell of burning wood.

Somehow I always associate Paris with the delightful odour of burning wood. Paris in the early mornings, and again Paris and burning wood always arises in my thoughts with the memory of that conversation.

"So you would talk about—what?"

"The violin, m'sieur."

"Ah, not the violinist."

"Yes, I would talk of both."

"But you put the violin first, mon brave."

"Yes it—it comes first."

"I see, you mean that without the one, you do not have the other."

"Yes."

He rolled and lit another of his interminable cigarettes, blew small clouds of smoke into the air, and rested his tousled head against the back of the pew-like seat, which my own head could not reach by many inches.

"I suppose," he commenced, as he waved a nicotine stained finger towards the violin shut up in its case, "that little wooden instrument, holds all the witchery in life for you."

"Witchery? What is that, m'sieur?"

"Wild joy of an unearthly order, amazement capturing all your feelings and sense, without knowing how they are ensnared, a sort of miracle, eh?"

"Yes, yes—a miracle."

"How do you suppose it is accomplished, how think you that one little wooden frame and one stick, called a bow, equipped with horse-hair, is capable of producing all those myriad sounds of which you are so enamoured?"

"I should think m'sieur——"

"Yes."

"Much trying, and more trying and trying, on and on, and then one day some of it comes, it is done."

"A more sensible explanation than many a grown-up person could give. Many fools actually believe that a violin plays itself, that a great violin concerto comes to the performer as a sort of spontaneous inspiration, and that practice is totally unnecessary."

"But m'sieur, one must be taught," then my thoughts reverting solely to myself, I murmured, "but how? I wonder how?"

My companion laughed his abrupt sneering little laugh, which I soon perceived was almost a habit with him. His eyes smiled in a lazy sort of way, but the laugh always somehow belied the expression in them. The laugh was always one of contempt.

"I was first taught by a brute who rapped me over the knuckles of both my hands until I thought he would actually crack them. Perhaps I ought to be grateful to the beast; he started a good foundation, some years of childish drudgery, then the Conservatoire, Brussels. There, with none too much to eat and little, or no money, to keep myself going with, I learned and learned, studied and memorised. Mon Dieu, how I worked, sweltered, and strove, most of the time half-starving. Then I won the premier gold medal for violin playing.

"After the ordeal of playing for that, my little friend, I fainted, and for a long while they couldn't bring me back to consciousness again. No, it wasn't overwork, it was underfeeding. Those were the years that sapped all my strength.

"Then more finishing lessons, and still more. Thus, whilst yet quite young, I became a concert soloist of the first rank, and I played in all the big capitals."

More cigarette rolling here took place, and for a while, he seemed lost in reminiscence.

My eyes, which I had never removed from him during this recital, to me of absorbing interest, probably assumed a

reproachful look; these pauses for more cigarettes, even whilst the ashes of former ones glowed over the lapels of his coat, like unto a miniature but ever-increasing Vesuvius, was more than flesh and blood could stand.

I tugged his sleeve, to recall him.

"Droll, enfant, très droll," he muttered.

"So—the violinist is now more interesting than the violin."

"Yes!" I said, "continue m'sieur, please continue."

"Better than a fairy-tale, hein?"

A look of slight doubt must have crept into my face, perhaps a touch of barely perceptible scorn.

"Oh much more—yes."

"However," he rejoined, "although no fairy-tale believe me, the bad witch, wicked demon, whatever you will, did not fail after a while, to put in an appearance. Then came calamity."

"Calamity? m'sieur, calamity?" I questioned, "that is——"

"The beginning of the end, trouble, disgrace."

"Oh, m'sieur, surely not, how came that about?" I whispered.

"Simple enough! The wicked old demon hag-witch appeared upon the scene of my labours and my triumphs safe enough. She found, with unerring eldritch skill, that former long years of my early youth had been eaten by a locust. Not idleness, but ill-nourishment, poverty, want, so with a subtlety worthy of her calling, she bestowed upon me as a present, a species of plague called neuritis."

I shook my head and pondered. "M'sieur, I do not understand."

"No, no, of course not. Yet this much is easy to comprehend: that to play the violin perfectly, one must be strong, with the strength of nerves and muscles, like, what shall I say, whipcord and fine steel. Neuritis lowers all nerves, muscles, vitality; sucks it and saps it like a caterpillar absorbs a leaf."

I understood, I was horrified. I pressed my under-lip with my teeth, and clutched my small stubby fingers into the palms of my hands.

"So—I lost my nerve, I couldn't satisfy myself, and when I could no longer do that, I could not either satisfy my public. They were quick to find that out."

"Gradually I ceased to command attention. The papers openly hinted that I was falling off, the big fees I could command as a first-class concert soloist, fell off accordingly."

My companion here chuckled odiously, it seemed to me, between puffs at his cigarette.

I continued to stare at him gravely; it did not appear to me to be an occasion for mirth.

"Ha! Ha! yes, and to be sure, the hag of horrid hent, you know, the same wicked fairy, lest I grew tired of her, sent me one of her most favoured servants and messengers. Dressed in bright colours he was, seemingly so sparkling and gay, offering such a gorgeous tonic for tired nerves, he even seemed to trip along to music and the full measure of life."

"A doctor, m'sieur!"

"Ah! no, mon enfant, not quite a doctor, although I thought so at the time. The son of Semele is no doctor, he is a devil."

"M'sieur."

"Yes, a devil in a charming disguise."

"M'sieur! Then who is Semele?"

"Who is she? Ha. Ha! Ma foi, a good jest."

"Why she is the mother of Bacchus. She is the worst of the female hounds of hell, and he is her whelp."

He rose heavily and crossed to the table he had lately occupied, talking the while.

"True, he appears in the likeness of a god, with bright eyes and rose-flushed cheeks, with brilliant coloured leaves of the vine, and with purple grapes twined in his hair.

"He brings delirium, but he also gives delight; he leaves a fever, still he has the power to bestow forgetfulness."

He lifted a bottle standing apart from the other ones upon the table; as he held it up I noticed it was half-full, and I noticed something else as well. Upon the paper round the bottle was printed the word "Cognac", and then some small star signs after the word.

So this strange man who played upon the violin so beautifully, also used the same "medicine" so beloved of my grand'mère.

I watched him draw out the cork, and the application of the bottle itself to his mouth, with apprehension.

I remembered only too well the strange effect this "medicine" invariably produced upon my grandmother.

The result was the same, and it was not long in coming. He drank and coughed, then drank again several times; how strong this "medicine" must be. I thought his eyes seemed to glitter as he held the bottle upon the table by way of an interval for breathing. His voice seemed thick and hoarse. "Bacchus sent me this," he croaked, "it is one of his gifts; see here, you strange child, I will give you a toast.

"Live and be happy, and when the time comes and Bacchus offers you any of his damned gifts like—like this, refuse them—live and be happy, but be anything but a violinist.

"Rather scrub the floors of a café like this. Keep music and the violin out of your life, for if you have not the strength of an angel, it will lead you to the devil.

"You will be spared the heartaches of struggling, of realizing ambition, only to be superseded by other new favourites who will take your place.

"If you must play, play outside the doors of cafés, rather than in opera houses, in brothels and dancing-halls sooner than at concerts for the elect. Then you will never know the agony of falling from being the idol of the public, to a seat in the orchestra of the opera, from the first seat even there, to a back one in the same orchestra.

"From the opera to teaching for a living. Teaching—teaching, oh great God give me forgetfulness, if nothing else."

When I saw the bottle again raised, preparatory to making the short journey to his mouth, knowing he would undoubtedly finish what I had come to regard as the most dangerous and horrible "medicine" in the world, I waited to hear no more, but fled from the room of the café into the street, troubled and amazed.

Something splashed down upon my cheek.

Two tears rolled away.

What was I crying for?

I never remembered crying before in my life, anyway, not these sort of tears.

It was many years before I read in a book that a Lord Tennyson had described just what such tears meant, and which he must have known so well. "Tears from the depths of some divine despair, rise in the heart and gather in the eyes." I did not know anything of such a thing at this time.

I wandered on up the hill of the Monmartre. It must have been about the hour of six, and it was almost dark.

The coloured windows of the great church which were lighted up, the church of "The Sacré Coeur" at the top of the hill, attracted me.

I passed through one of the little swing doors and crept inside.

Four tall candles were burning upon the high altar, but no service was taking place. The great church was nearly deserted. Most of the little side chapels were empty but brilliantly lighted. I passed along from one to the other, thinking deeply.

I have reason to believe my grandmother, if she was indeed of any religious denomination at all, professed, or rather did not profess, to be a Catholic. This I gathered from her occasional spasmodic departures to a small catholic church in Marseilles, usually after more than ordinary liberal potations of her Cognac medicine, or at times when she considered that business was especiallybad.

True, I had heard her mumble verses out of the English bible, but neither she, nor anyone else, had attempted to instruct me in any religious beliefs; therefore up to this period in my life I had been allowed to grow up fancy free, and totally unacquainted with any of the teachings of the Church.

A silent little figure, I watched people, now praying, sometimes silently, sometimes aloud, before one or more sacred images in the little side chapels of "The Sacré Coeur".

The conviction dawned upon me that they all knew exactly what they wanted and moreover, rose to their feet possessed with the belief that they would receive what they had asked for.

A few brought candles, and having lighted them added to the other illuminations upon the little altars, before kneeling in petition.

I entered the last little chapel. I was quite alone. A marble statue of the Virgin looked down benignly from the altar, upon either side of which burned two big candles in great golden-painted wooden candlesticks. I never remember to have prayed before, but I knelt down and commenced straightway aloud in English, tinged with the strong Scotch accent acquired from my grandmother.

"Dear Lady, if it is at all possible, I badly want a

violin, and I still more badly must learn to play it. I do verra weel believe it is the most beautiful thing in the world, so it is nae more difficult to ask for the most beautiful thing than for anything not so beautiful, and which one does na want. Div yer ken the thing I ask is more tae me than a' the world else.

"My grand'mère is most difficult, she wud no' give her consent. Please lady overcome her somehow, I canna and I've often tried. Please lady if I should get a violin and a' the teaching I need sae much, don't let the Son of Semele come and offer me ony o' his cursed gifts; tell him I dinna want thim ever.

"Please also take away the noo—something I can't remember, fra the mon who plays like an angel, and is under the power o' the devil, and if it is possible, to drive the hell hound woman Semele and her wretched son awa fra him, also please do it so that he can play as he did, an sae get his nerve, and not pray any more for forgetfulness fra the damned bottle of 'medicine' they call Cognac, for that too, he said, came from Semele, and her beastly son B—b—ah! I ken his name now Back-hus. World without end Lady. Amen."

My meditations were interrupted by a quiet chuckle behind me, and a softly uttered, "Well, I'm damned!"

I turned round, still kneeling, and confronted the artist who had bought the Persian bowls at our shop in the Rue Notte.

He laid his hands lightly upon my shoulders and looked down at me laughingly.

"Little Saint Michael," he said, "what is the meaning of that strange Pagan petition you have just uttered, surely the oddest impromptu ever heard inside a Christian Church?"

"M'sieur," I ventured, scrambling to my feet, "how much of what I asked, have you heard?" I spoke to him in French.

"All of it," he laughed, "a quaint mixture of English and Scotch. Ah, yes! That comes of course from the Dragon. Oh! But Michael, little Michael! To ask the Holy Virgin to assist you in keeping Semele and her son Bacchus in order is too funny."

He seemed convulsed with merriment, as he led me away out of the church of "The Sacré Coeur".

As we sauntered side by side down the hill he asked me,

"What has happened to you to-day? Who was the man who played the violin to you?"

Falteringly and as well as I could I told him.

"Adrian Levinski," he said, "I know him well. One-time brilliant solo violinist, then he took to drink unfortunately, afterwards leader at the Opera House, Paris, dismissed from that seat of honour a month ago, then sent away back among the last row of first violins, even dismissed from that post only last night. Yes! Yes! I know him, a good artiste, but dissipated, drunken, unscrupulous; shouldn't wonder if one day he wound up a first-class anarchist, half-Russian, half-Portuguese, a bad combination. I suppose he told you all that nonsense about Semele and Bacchus when he was in his cups?"

As well as I could, I hastened to exonerate my absent companion.

"No, m'sieur!" I averred, "indeed it came about all from the cause of new—new something."

He laughed.

"Neuritis, I suppose?"

"Yes," I said.

"As good a name as any other for it doubtless," and the Painter sighed sadly, I thought.

"Ah yes m'sieur, but it did verily eat into his nerves and muscles, he told me so himself, attacked him even as the caterpillar the green leaf, because he did not have enough to eat, and keep alive, for years and years, when he was young."

"By Jove!" mused the Painter, "there may be something in that—although I have never heard this version of it before—poor devil."

"Yes, m'sieur, he was, I think, with the devils when I left him."

"Highly probable, and a not unusual state with him. And so little Saint Michael, the greatest thing you want to do in life is to play the violin."

"Yes, indeed, yes m'sieur—without the devils though."

"That's taken for granted, a sort of spiritual ecstasy only. Well now, how is it going to be done?"

"Indeed, indeed M'sieur, I do not know. I have a grandmother."

"Rather! The Dragon has to be taken into account."

"Alas! m'sieur," I vouchsafed innocently," she also every night drinks the same 'medicine' he drank this

afternoon, and she becomes all altered, sometimes funny, sometimes so furious, I do not know what to do for her, and I do not know what to do for myself."

"What?" queried the Painter, "do they call the particular medicine which they favour."

"It is written on the bottle, 'Cognac'."

He whistled softly. "The Dragon too, eh?"

"Poor little Michael, yes I understand. Poor little Michael. I think now, Michael, you were quite right tc appeal to Our Lady of Sorrows, to keep the devils away."

We walked slowly as we talked and reached the foot of the hill where the door of the Café Beaux Arts stood open The shaded lights inside flung an irregular tracery of gold across the pavement where we stood. The Painter looked at me for a long time; he seemed lost in thought, then he smiled, that half-whimsical, yet partly cynical smile of his, the smile I often noticed flash across his face when I became better acquainted with him.

"Little Michael, I think I can help you towards your kingdom."

"M'sieur! My kingdom?"

"Aye it might be even that, for we all have one within us; but assuredly we all have to be helped at some time. I have been helped in my life. Otherwise there is a time when any of us may go under. You understand what I mean by going under."

I nodded.

"Your grand'mère must be spoken to, and by Jove, she ought to be spoken to. I personally consider her a living exemplification of that particular animal in the painting of which both Cuyp and Cooper excelled."

"M'sieur!—une vache?" I queried, although a trifle uneasily perhaps.

"Yes!" continued the Painter gravely. "Veritable une vache, and moreover one of an unusually offensive and intractable order. However, I believe I know the particular stake and rope, to say nothing of the field with a somewhat limited horizon; that will prove efficacious, even in the case of so unmanageable an animal."

"Listen to me."

There was little need for the injunction, I had never removed my eyes from him, my ears were well open, and more than usually alert.

"In my big studio at home——"

"Marseilles," I queried.

"Yes, Marseilles! I have a beautiful violin; it lacks both strings and a bridge, the sound post has probably dropped. That can soon be altered. I have a good bow that also needs rehairing, a defect soon remedied."

"I play the violin quite well."

"M'sieur! You?"

"Yes! Oh not as well as your acquaintance of this afternoon, but I can play. I was a pupil at the Conservatoire here in Paris for a long time, until I found out where my kingdom lay."

"Painting m'sieur? Pictures?" I ventured.

"Yes, Michael!

"Well, if I find you really love the violin, and mean to learn, and study and work, I will give you that violin and bow, and I will teach you the first notes upon it, the first scales, the elementary part. Afterwards I will see you pass on to somebody better qualified to teach you."

"M'sieur! You will give me all this, do this for me, why?"

"A compact, little Michael. I have my kingdom to think of also. I mean to paint you. The rest is a fair exchange."

I grasped his hand convulsively.

"So, m'sieur, each of us will get our kingdom?"

"Yes."

"M'sieur forgets one thing." I shook my head slowly and dolefully. "M'sieur forgets my grand'mère."

"Oh no, I haven't forgotten her, I don't think anybody ever could.

"Leave it to me little Michael, and say nothing."

I said good night, and did so moreover very hastily, owing to he fact that through the open door a lady's high-pitched voice was demanding where the hell that young limb of the devil had gone. "Blast his een, the macaroni is getting caud, a'll break his bluida neck."

Before I fled, I noticed the Painter had upraised his eyes almost wearily to heaven, as if invoking its aid.

* * * *

Few waifs are destined to become immortal at the age of twelve years. I did not become so by reason of anything that I myself had done.

It was the Painter's triumph. He had come into his kingdom.

The picture he painted of me, which I believed at the time to be the little St. John in the Wilderness, with a staff in my hand, and the white lamb Bébé by my side, was destined to become immortal, yet not as the little St. John at all.

It hung in the Paris Salon when I was twelve, and multitudes gazed upon one of the masterpieces of the world.

It hangs now in a great European gallery for all time; millions must have seen it, but not more than four people know that it is me, encircled by everything that great art could do for me.

How the Painter ever overcame my grandmother's endless objections, objections to my being a "painted fule in a picture", objections to my learning that "cat squalling, screeching instrument of hell and the devil, for fairs and dances, called the fiddle", I shall never know.

The fact remains, they were overcome.

The Painter said great art could overcome everything. In after years I knew he was right. God moves in a mysterious way, and Art in a wonderful one. Probably both are absolutely identical and moving in the same direction. The Painter always thought so, and said so.

Little St. John in the Wilderness, even allowing for the extraordinary belief of painters that he could ever have been in the Wilderness at all at such a tender age, must assuredly never be in any way connected with a violin. Yet to me the loveliest instrument in the world is undoubtedly associated with the memory of the child saint.

Clad only in some brilliant wild animal's skin pinned round me by way of a loin cloth, with Bébé, the white lamb, lying near appearing to like my efforts, I learned my first notes and scales, between the hours of posing for my picture, amidst the rocks and trees the Painter had arranged as a huge background.

He gave me my first lessons, and he taught me well.

The violin he told me of in Paris he gave me as a present. It was a Guadignini; how much I owed to that fact.

There has only been one other instrument in the world I have loved more.

So through the long hot summer days the picture in the studio progressed and I progressed also.

It was not easy; the Painter was right. I had to work

hard, very hard. Perhaps the hardest thing was grand'-mère. It became necessary I should practice at home; grand'mère raved and shouted and swore. I found the way out, also a way to peace.

It must assuredly have been the angles who planned that little garret retreat across the courtyard and up to the steps where the oils, varnish, lumber, and old pictures, frames were kept.

I would shut myself up here and sometimes for five and six hours every day I would stand and practice the violin, my music placed against an obliging picture-frame upon a dusty shelf, which might have been fixed in that very position in order to be convenient for my limited height. The door barred from within, my grand'mère might shout and curse in vain.

She was mercifully unable to negotiate the steep wooden stairs. I was safe.

It was true that later on in life I was destined to work much harder in one of the great musical academies of the world, but I did work very hard for a child, and I shall always remember all I first learned of music was taught me by the Painter.

A great artiste helping along a little brother, who wanted so badly to be an artiste also, some day.

I do not think in looking back, that the Painter studied, for a time, in vain at the Paris Conservatoire.

It was a merciful happening with regard to myself.

I possessed a wonderful violin, a fairly good bow, and a master who knew what he was teaching me, so I laboured very hard.

Two long years before the scroops and squeaks, scratch-ings and wails, oft-times as of one in great physical travail, had been subdued. Verily it was a long weary time before I discovered one day that, as if circumstances had changed by magic in the night, all these things departed, never to return.

In their place instead, came to me a silvery singing tone, I could glide with ease from position to position, note to note, no breaks, the bow was becoming curiously elastic, and I could play long passages of music with what was becoming one endless bow of equal quality.

"Why?" mocked the Painter one day. "Why lose half an inch each end of your bow, use every bit of it. No, no, don't wobble, don't alter the tone; your wrist, only

your wrist, does it, see here!" So he showed me, so he would teach me.

"Little Michael," he said to me in the studio one day, you will have to go."

"Go!" I queried.

He nodded. "I have taught you all I am really able to teach you about the violin. You must have a good master now, a fine violinist to work upon you and with you."

"How is it to be done?" I asked.

"I think you provided a way for yourself."

I put down my violin, absent-mindedly applied some resin from my pocket to the bow, and shook my head.

"I don't understand."

"You have never seen your own picture?"

Again I shook my head.

"No, you would never let me see it. You always covered it up, even when it was finished."

"Would you like to come with me now and see it hanging in the great Salon?"

"Why yes, but then grand'mère?"

"Damn grand'mère!" observed the painter with quite considerable warmth, "don't even mention her in the same breath with the Salon, or violin, or anything that stands for—" then he paused.

"Yes, that stands for . . ."

"My kingdom, your kingdom, in fact for anybody's kingdom."

Grand'mère certainly never appeared to be popular.

Unfortunately, at that precise moment, I was unable to think of anything to adduce by way of a possibly favourable characteristic in connection with her.

I remember firstly that upon visiting grand'mère in the Rue Notte, any explanations became quite unnecessary, for grand'mère reclined beyond all speech upon the floor of the sitting-room. One quite empty "medicine" bottle stood upon the table, another half-empty one sloped perilously near the edge.

"Phew!" exclaimed the Painter, hastily opening the window. "Come," he said, "we go to see your picture in Paris."

I remember it all so well, how gay the boulevardes were, cornucopias of flowers literally overflowed all the street

kiosks. A band had started to play in the Jardin Luxemburg.

I stopped to listen. "It is joy," I said, "the music is bright, but the band is of brass instruments, how harsh."

The Painter laughed. "You shall hear the violins and the strings you love, at the opera to-night."

"The opera, ah! the opera, the violins, I long for that."

"You shall hear them, but the Salon first."

"There is music also there," added the Painter, "but you will not hear it, you will feel it."

"Yes!" I said, "colour is music."

"So you have found that out?"

"Yes!"

To the Salon we went. We traversed the great sanded approach, with its huge airy canvas hangings looped overhead.

"It is like a Roman Emperor's tent," I said.

"Michael, where have you ever seen a Roman Emperor's tent?"

"I saw it in one of the pictures that is never sold at home in the Rue Notte."

The artist chuckled. "It shares the same fate as the majority of the pictures here Michael."

"But won't my picutre, I mean your picture, sell?"

"It is sold little Michael," he said gravely, "sold for a sum so big that it is really a fortune. Some of that money I am going to spend upon giving you lessons from a great violinist.

"I am taking you to your picture now, because I want you to see it before your impressions become confused amidst so many pictures, or become blunted by so great a riot of colours."

A surging mass stood before something; they were packed line behind line. I could only see rows of people's backs.

After a good while they thinned away, and we were pushed to the front.

I saw an enormous canvas, filled with forbidding rocks, dried-up shrub, and parched undergrowth. It absolutely transfigured scorching heat beating upon desolation, the lonely, unutterable despair of a real wilderness, with only one living breathing thing in it, which became so startling in its reality that the naked child appeared to be walking out of the picture.

The eyes of everyone were riveted upon the vivid life-like figure. It was wonderful, bizarre, but beautiful at the same time.

"Well?" asked the Painter after a while.

"I didn't know I was quite naked."

"I altered that afterwards——"

"The lamb is not there!"

"I painted Bébé out."

"The staff?"

"No need, I had a better inspiration, look at the title."

I read "Ishmael" printed in big letters underneath the picture.

"So I was not the little St. John as I had thought, after all."

Through the hum of admiration, delight, criticism, upon all sides, we talked quite quietly as if nobody had been present.

"Am I like that?"

"Your living image for all time."

"But not—not beautiful like that?"

"It is as you are Michael."

"But some of it is only imagination?"

"What is real artist imagines is true Michael and it is always perfect."

"Always?"

"Always."

"*M'sieur, enchanté de vous voir.*"

A lady, so fashionably attired in brilliant silks enveloped by cascades of lace, that to my early fancy she appeared almost overdressed, advanced and greeted the Painter. With her was a most beautiful little girl.

"You wicked man," the lady continued, whilst she playfully shook a jewel-studded lorgnette at the Painter.

"Have I not acquired three of your pictures; positively had to grab them, and pay enormous prices for them. Oh don't shake your head, I would have paid double what I did, for any of them. Now you paint your great masterpiece that all Paris is raving over, and I am not permitted to buy it for my Salon. You avaricious man, you have sold it to a famous gallery. Are you not content with great fame, that you demand riches as well?"

The Painter smiled. "Madame la Duchesse, you are too kind. I fear you overstate both myself and my work. I lament it is not possible for my picture to be in your most

valued and artistic keeping. With regard to your playful accusation of demanding riches, one really needs much money to live."

"Nonsense," retorted the Duchesse, "your wonderful coloured, lazy, and enchanting life, ought to be sufficient reward in itself."

"Lazy!" debated the Painter. "I work awfully hard; it took me two years thought and toil to finish that picture."

"And now m'sieur, how do you like the world at your feet?"

"Dear Duchesse, I was about to bestow upon you even a higher title than your own, and say Patron Saint of Art, the world has always been at your feet."

"How do you like it? Is it a multi-coloured ball of silk that you only play with?"

"I have never unravelled it, m'sieur."

"Madame, if I stretched out my hands to hold the skein for you, they would falter strangely."

"Would your attitude be one of supplication or doubt, m'sieur."

"Both Duchesse."

I was standing silent and quite unnoticed at the back of them. I observed Madame la Duchesse give the Painter a quick questioning look. She seemed to my childish fancy, most fascinating, and I felt, without any reason for knowing why, that I liked her enormously.

The Duchesse D'Auvergne was remarkably young and unquestionably beautiful.

The little girl who had been studying the picture intently, here broke in.

I remember a rapid mental impression of the short maize-coloured silk frock, with bronze stockings, the wide straw hat with its bands of black velvet hanging over her shoulder, and underneath the cluster of dark curls. Her extraordinary little face was flushed and sparkling with excitement. I also noticed that her eyes were violet, a colour I had never associated with eyes before.

"Well, Marie, what do you think of it?"

"Oh Madame—would it be deemed extraordinary and quite out of the way if I kissed Ishmael in the picture, it is the most exquisite thing I have ever seen."

The Duchess D'Auvergne laughed.

"It would be unconventional little Marie; certainly

it wouldn't horrify me in the least, it might cause expostulation from the onlookers, to say nothing of the Salon attendants, but it would undoubtedly be a great tribute to the artist. This gentleman painted the picture Marie."

"M'sieur, permit me to present to you one of the youngest of your countless admirers. The Princess Marie Idourska, daughter of the late Grand Duke Ivan. She is an orphan and is upon a visit to me here in Paris."

The Painter smiled and shook hands with the little Princess.

"Is he like that," the little girl asked.

The Painter was watching the Duchesse and enquired absent-mindedly, "He? Princess."

The Princess Marie stretched out a dimpled hand towards the picture.

"Of course, Princess, why he is here, I had forgotten all about him. Come here little Saint Michael," and he drew me forward to the middle of the group.

Madame la Duchesse and the little Princess Marie suddenly appeared extraordinarily interested. They each took hold of one of my hands, seemed to devour me with their eyes, and almost gave me the impression they were straight-away going to carry me away with them.

I was not even fashionably dressed and must have looked absolutely shabby beside their bright silks and laces. I made a comforting mental note that the Painter was also somewhat shabbily attired, since fashionable clothes did not interest him either.

"Now we have the original here," smiled the Duchesse as she laid a hand lightly upon my shoulder, "I am almost tempted to follow Marie's example and kiss him; the thought was yours, Marie, I mustn't rob you of it, you take precedence."

"Yes!" said the small Princess.

I remained quite still and gravely considered them both.

The Painter laughed. "Michael has rings and rings and circles around him," he chuckled, "he is quite inaccessible to any of the emotions of life, except art. The greatest of all art fro him is music, the particular form of music, the violin."

The Duchesse nodded, she appeared to understand. She continued to smile upon me, almost lovingly I thought. "You love the violin, little Michael?"

"Yes madame, beyond everything."

"Does he play the violin?" she asked.

"Yes quite well already. He is going to have the best lessons now it is possible to give him."

"That is what I sold my body for," I announced simply, "it will be more than worth it."

The Duchesse and the Painter both burst out laughing.

"Heavens! Michael!" exclaimed the Painter, "don't talk as if you were a slave in the market of ancient Alexandria."

The Duchesse seemed highly amused, whilst the little Princess Marie regarded me with wide-opened wondering eyes.

"You see," continued the Painter, "I am afraid Michael is very disappointed, for when he sat for me I originally painted him as the little St. John in the Wilderness; he was clad in a leopard's skin, held a staff in his hand; Bébé, a pet lamb, and a most tractable creature that I bought as a tame pet, always reposed at his feet. After he had finished the sittings, which were interspersed with violin lessons for the better part of two years. I grew dissatisfied with the picture.

"One night a strange trick of light in the studio suggested something utterly different to me. I suddenly visualized, as all we painters do, that a burning desert painted in all its scorching arid horror, making a setting for one living breathing figure, browned by the sun, would be infinitely better than the picture I had painted of the little St. John.

"So I set to work without my model, and painted out all that went to make the Saint. I made him a Pagan instead, the first of the Pagans, or the last of the Pagans, whichever you will. He is an artist, will always be an artist, and I think some day a great one. For a great artist," concluded the Painter, "what living symbol more appropriate than Ishmael. He must inevitably stand almost, if not perpetually, alone. The world around him will, in reality, be a desert."

"What a cynical thought," mused the Duchesse. "I hope not, poor little Michael."

The little Princess Marie broke in, to ask a question, which was, perhaps, as startling as it was innocent.

"The painting then m'sieur is a dream, an ideal, not according to real life."

I was sorely tempted to remain tongue-tied, yet it seemed ungenerous not to speak the simple truth, and after all I had not paid my need of homage yet to my more than benefactor.

"M'moiselle la Princess," I therefore answered quietly and deliberately, "the coloured cat skins I wore were only transparent rags before the eyes of m'sieur the Painter, his art saw Nature and painted it truthfully as it really is. My own mother, if I had one, would not know the difference between us, the painting and me."

Then the Duchesse D'Auvergne stooped down and kissed me. It was the first kiss I had ever received, and I noticed that she was blushing through the delicately perfumed powder upon her face.

"Both of you must come to my box at the Opera House to-night, it is a new opera. I will allow Marie to stay up this one night for a great occasion. It is the first performance of a new work. The interlude of the Second Act is, they tell me, a wonderful violin solo, with the orchestra accompanying. The famous violinist Leon Courtelles is to play it; that should please Michael."

The Painter shook his head. "We are not dressed for the opera;" he said; "we are going there, it is true, but to humble seats where correct dress is not necessary. You see, Duchesse, we have to catch the night mail afterwards for Marseilles. I have no abode in Paris; Michael and I are here for a quick holiday trip. We only arrived from Marseilles this morning."

"Not another excuse," commanded the Duchesse. "You both sit in my box well back, nobody present need see either of you, or your clothes. Marie and I will be more than dressed for us all."

The charming lady dived into a tiny golden jewelled bag she carried, and produced a card. "Take this card, Michael; here I will pencil the number of the box upon it, both of you ask for me, you will be present at a wonderful evening. By the way, little Michael, keep that card, it might be useful to you one day, if ever I could do anything for you to help you. Keep it safe. See, I have scribbled an open invitation, for you always, upon the back of it."

I nodded. I did not realize at the time how true her words were, how much that card was destined to help me in life.

We paid our adieus, and the Painter and I wandered

out of the great domed, sand-strewn vestibule into the sunny streets of Paris.

"Where shall we go and dine, Michael?"

"To the Café de Beaux Arts."

"Why?" he asked.

"It is there I first heard the violin, it has associations."

He laughed gaily. "But what of the food, Michael? and, although you do not drink, I have some thoughts in that direction for myself."

"Then let us go wherever you would wish."

"No, Michael, the Beaux Arts let it be. I cannot possibly walk all that way, we must have a taxi.

"I shall go there prepared for the worst, but shall order the best. I wonder if the dissipated individual who plays the violin like an angel, still haunts the place."

"I don't know."

"Do you want to see him!"

"No!"

"He doesn't interest you any longer?"

"Only inasmuch that he plays as he does."

"That would always interest you?"

"That would always interest everybody."

"Michael, there is one curious thing about you; not but what there are many other curious things, if it comes to that. You appear to know so exactly what you want in life, and you never deviate by a hair's breadth, until you get it.

"I wonder, little Michael, if life is going to fill your hands with all her most wonderful gifts, and tumble all her blessings over your head in addition."

"How should I know, and no one can guess, m'sieur?"

"What sort of use would you make of them, I wonder?"

"I do not know."

"Always the highest, Michael."

"Yes."

"Remember, mediocrity is hell."

"Always?"

"No, only to those who had the greatest talents, and either lost them or missed their chance."

"And to the others?"

"Oh! mediocrity to them is a sort of second-hand paradise, only because they haven't any power or desire to know the highest."

"Tell me," I asked," what to the highest artiste of all?"

"Heaven, little Michael, mixed with a hell. The hell will be the burning lonely desert, that I painted in your picture."

"But," I queried, "thousands stand before it, they admire it, and think of it."

"That is exactly what they will do, Michael, if you ever become a superlatively great violinist. The multitude will worship before you, and around, but you will be always alone, as your figure is in the picture."

"Always?"

"Yes, I'm afraid—always."

I was so tired when I reached the Café de Beaux Arts that I fell asleep in the old familiar wooden pew whilst the first drinks and dinner were being ordered.

A natural conclusion to a long railway journey, an afternoon at the Salon with all its excitement, to say nothing of the Grand Opera and another long railway journey to follow, all within twenty-four hours.

I had dozed in the same seat before when the little room had been hot and the charcoal fire had been lighted. Upon this occasion the room was delightfully bright and airy, and the little tables all gay with summer flowers, stocks, and blue larkspurs.

Only three parts awake, I became aware that another had joined us at our small table and was sitting opposite to me. I was still too sleepy to notice, or care about the new arrival.

The ice tinkled faintly in the glasses of coloured cocktails they were drinking. The Painter was speaking, and half woke me up again, and I was drowsily listening to what he was saying.

"I think your terms are exorbitant, absolutely extortionate, but I will pay them to you for one year; advance him as far in that time as you can."

"Agreed, m'sieur, but why bring objectionable adjectives to bear upon the contract, for it is a contract, I take it."

"Absolutely, the first instalment when we return to Marseilles."

"My fees are high, perhaps, but in Paris, in France, I am unique."

"So I should imagine," observed the Painter tersely, "and, by the way, you need not trouble to instil any of your equally unique ideas on Paganism, or even attempt to demonstrate your soul-sapping theories of either

neurasthenia, or the entire futility of all modern existence. He is a worker, he means to succeed, he is *not* a Pagan."

The man opposite me yawned. "You amaze me m'sieur. Having visited the Salon, and having had the honour to view your picture, I should have pronounced him myself, pure Pagan. However, my occasional conversational flights need in no way disturb you; I presume they will of necessity be confined to purely technical matters, if I have to teach so much in such a comparatively small space of time."

The soup arrived, and I aroused myself, and sat up. Opposite me was Adrian Levinski, the violinist. He was regarding me intently. Could it be merely my half-waking imagination, or was his face really evil? It seemed to me both evil and inscrutable at that moment. I have wondered sometimes if it chanced to be a swift premonition of what was to happen in the future.

"Michael, you look tired out," said the Painter, "eat your dinner; this is M'sieur Adrian Levinski. You have met him before?"

I nodded to each in turn.

"You have heard him play?"

"I have heard him play most exquisitely."

Levinski laughed.

"He is going to give you violin lessons, Michael, for the term of one year."

"M'sieur, I am grateful."

"You will have to work hard."

"I shall work."

"M'sieur Adrian Levinski has just informed me, during the time you were slumbering, that he owns a house in Marseilles, is taking up his abode there, and is giving a certain number of lessons to advanced pupils. You will be his youngest, probably his worst, if only by reason of your age, to say nothing of the disabilities you have had to contend against."

"I understand; that will not always be so."

The two men exchanged glances.

The fish had arrived. Levinski neatly extracted the side bones from his sole colbert, and addressed the Painter. "He seems dead certain of what he wants!"

"Yes! and is dead certain to get it."

Levinski shrugged his shoulders. "That is upon the knees of the gods."

"Damn the gods," retorted the Painter irritably. "It lies between you. You, the master, you will teach; he, the pupil, he will absorb all the music and art you will be able to impart. Absorb, heavens! You see this glass," hereupon the Painter lifted the remainder of the cocktail before him, "he will absorb the essence of it all, even like this cherry."

Levinski turned to the next course. I noticed that nothing appeared to interfere with his extraordinary appetite. "Your simile is unfortunate m'sieur, provided you do me the honour to liken me to the pure spirit; the cherry is only capable of absorbing a small portion of that spirit, although unquestionably artificially coloured by it. Likewise it appears to me to be impervious to either fire or ice."

"Could you conceive a more ideal combination," demanded the Painter. "It absorbs only the essential spirit to preserve it perfectly, is utterly impervious to other outside influences, even to the extremes of the poles apart: did it absorb any more, there would be a flaw in it, it would be sloppy, useless, and merely bad."

Levinski started to attack a large portion of chicken, and a second plate containing salad, as if he had not hitherto partaken of a crumb.

"M'sieur's mental and moral deductions appear to be, up to a certain point, so logical, would it be an indiscretion to ask him to further enlighten us to a sermon upon stones, as Shakespeare would call it? Some stones in general, for instance, but cherry stones in particular."

"Perhaps," mused the Painter, "one might suppose it contained the inner essence, the soul itself of the little cherry. What do you think, little Michael?"

"Perhaps," I answered, "and it might be the reason it is so protected."

Levinski laughed, as he stuffed a portion of salad into his mouth, but there seemed to be a sneer in the laugh.

"Tiens, he is droll. Heigho! It is not for me to discuss metaphysical improbabilities, the pre-supposing of the impalpable invariably to my mind suggests the eventual and complete exposition of the impossible. The bare contemplation horrifies me to such an extent, I must turn to wine by way of consolation."

The artist pushed the still nearly filled bottle of wine, towards him.

"Why are you drinking so little?"

"I am playing to-night."

"Where?"

"At the Grand Opera. I play the solo, in itself almost a violin concerto with orchestra, before Act II of the new opera performed there to-night."

"I understood Leon Courtelles was to play it."

"He was to have done so; he is in bed too ill to play at present, with lung trouble." Then with a strange flash of sudden egoism and pride, "M'sieur does not do me the honour to compare us, surely?"

The Painter did not answer this direct challenge, he turned to me instead.

"What do you think of that, Michael?"

"I think, as we shall be there to listen, it will be a wonderful thing in a most wonderful day."

Levinski suddenly grasped my hand across the table impulsively.

"Mon Dieu, but you are a most strange child and have the habit of saying the unexpected." He turned to the Painter and addressed him. "Ah! but that unexpected, how it cheers, how it heals the heart." Levinski was pouring out his words in the torrential way of old. "I who am not deemed worthy to be the permanent leader, the first violin of the opera, am yet sent for when they are in a panic, when Courtelles is stricken and they can find no one to take his place; no great violinist finished enough to play this extraordinarily modern and difficult music. Ha! Ha! They send for me then. Well I shall play to-night of my very best, yes my very best, and that is saying something. The child here, in some strange way, has heartened me; I will teach him also of my best, and one day may he become great, and—perhaps"—he hesitated for the fraction of a second, "what I am not."

"Petit Michael, I drink to you; m'sieur, I drink to you also, first to your wonderful picture, and next to our contract. Will you not now drink with me, will you not both wish me luck?"

I remember we placed our three glasses solemnly together; mine contained limonade it is true, but the toast may not have lost anything in sincerity upon that account.

"I must go now, it is time," murmured Levinski, getting up from the table. He nodded to us both and then turned suddenly back to the Painter, whilst he appeared

to hesitate as if to choose the particular words he needed.

"Did Michael Caviol here ever have that effect upon you, did he ever hearten you in your work?"

The Painter smiled, almost indulgently, as one who having long known a certain truth would unfold it again to a querulous child who seeks information.

"Very often," he answered, "Oh! yes, Michael does not know how often. I should never have finished, what the world is pleased to call my greatest picture, if it had not been for him."

Levinski crushed his floppy black hat over his head and left the restaurant. The Patron brought the bill, and we once more ventured out into the streets of Paris, and made for the Opera House.

In the window of a florist's shop two beautiful bouquets of flowers were displayed.

"Expense is really of no consequence whatever now," murmured the Painter, as we paused to admire them, "yet I remember the time when I could have lived comfortably in Paris for two whole months for the price of these two floral offerings. I shall certainly buy them."

"What will M'sieur do with them?"

"Take them to the Opera House. I present one to Madame la Duchesse, you present the other to the little Princess."

"The bouquets will serve yet another purpose," I observed. "They will help to distract attention from the first impression of the shabbiness of our clothes."

The Painter laughed as he paid the big price demanded.

"You rob your remark of any snobbishness Michael, since you are evidently more concerned about not wounding too deeply the susceptibilities of the uniformed attendants, to say nothing of the bejewelled audience. These flowers will undoubtedly be our ambassadors in a double sense."

"So m'sieur, let us say as we give them away, that we have dressed the flowers as we would have been dressed ourselves, could we have chosen our own clothes."

The Painter stopped in the middle of the boulevarde and shouted with laughter.

"M'sieur is amused?" I ventured.

"Oh! Michael, you are really most quaint."

When we entered the Duchesse's big box, at the opera,

I am afraid I thrust my bouquet almost unceremoniously into the little Princess Marie's hands.

The great orchestra was tuning up, hidden away in a corner of the box. I was oblivious to anything else.

Those mysterious sounds captivated me. The throbbing of many delicately played strings, the pleading notes of 'cellos, the sonorous burning notes of double basses. The French horns calling across to one another like lowing cattle in Elysian meads, the piping of birdlike flutes, the deeper call of oboes and bassoons, wove around me their enchanted spell.

Was I listening to a spiritual hive of bees? Or only hearing, for the first time, the nesting of all the birds, and animals, within a charmed circle, before the presence of the Early Gods, when first the world was made?

To this day, I have no idea what that opera was about. I never once looked at the programme, and scarcely glanced at the stage.

My eyes never left the orchestra from when the first sound came from all those hundred or more instruments, sounding as one unforgettable whispered note, until the last chords of the finale.

I was utterly lost; had I heard something like this in some different world, at some other time?

I could not determine if it was real, or a sort of dream. There was an interval followed by much clapping of hands.

I did not heed it any more than the ice that had been placed by my side during an interval, and slowly melted away untouched, into the little silver bowl.

A small music stand, lighted from the top, was placed, during the interval, close to the desk of the conductor.

The great lights in the front of the Opera House were dimmed down, but I could distinguish Adrian Levinski, and that he was about to play the interlude of the second act, with its unusual violin solo.

The conductor shot out a little black baton. In the half-light it had the effect of a small darting snake, that sometimes seemed to rear its head to listen, and ever and anon poised itself wickedly to strike.

Was it indeed a snake, I wondered, and was Levinski trying to charm the thing.

He might well have done so and succeeded, even beyond the night dreams of a musically mesmerised reptile.

The little darting head deflected ever so little; the

effect was instantaneous. A shower of silvery exquisite notes came from his violin. How clearly that proportionately tiny instrument sounded in that vast house packed with people all quite still.

Great throbbing chords went on and on, played faultlessly. The entire gamut of the violin fingerboard with its four strings must have been exhausted whilst seeming still to be inexhaustible.

The main big motif of the opera was being played upon one violin. I had forgotten about the orchestra in listening to such playing, for it did not seem any longer necessary.

The composer of the opera, however, had not forgotten, the little black snake suddenly darted, picking up here 'cellos, elsewhere other violins and strings, then all the other instruments closed around swiftly and softly, always dominated by those strings of strange chords, forming a barbaric melody of itself, only accompanied by the orchestra.

It was impossible to judge how long the solo lasted with regard to actual time.

I remember towards the end, for a too brief spell, the violin alone was heard, playing the simple theme in single notes, as beautiful as the human voice, with a pleading, as if asking for an inevitable eternity. Then it ceased after a glide upwards into some height where only the stars swung in space.

Before the curtain went up, the violinist received a tremendous ovation; it was evident that Paris appreciated his gifts. I wondered if Levinski himself was able to do so.

I thought he looked utterly tired and ill.

The remainder of the opera contained nothing for me to equal that brilliant violin solo; it was the first time in my life I had listened to what was practically a violin concerto with orchestra.

At the conclusion of the opera, all the singers had responded to their many calls.

It was known that the composer of the opera was far away in another land, still the vast audience continued to applaud.

The chef d'orchestre turned and bowed, then an idea appeared to strike him, he drew Andrian Levinski forward.

The applause redoubled, it was a charming tribute to him.

We were all standing now right in the big front bay of the box, immediately over the orchestra.

The little Princess Marie leaned slightly over the embossed balcony, and threw her big bouquet at Levinski's feet.

He appeared bewildered for a moment, then he picked it up, and, raising his head in our direction, bowed to her. The little Princess turned to me, she even smiled at me, it is true, but she was cruel enough to say "I threw your bouquet away because you have not spoken to me the whole evening—he has!"

"What a woman's reason," laughed the Duchesse.

"Little Princess," said the Painter, "if I am not very much mistaken, Michael here will speak to you one day, and moreover, through the power of the very same instrument."

How could I know at that time that he was uttering a prophecy.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, cheering and applause, clapping of hands and a great wave of murmuring, burst out again.

I had been quite unconscious of the fact, but the eyes of everyone in the big Opera House were turned towards our box.

"Duchesse, they have recognized you and the Princess Marie," whispered the Painter.

She looked at him, just as if she were very proud of him, I thought.

"You are very guileless, my friend," she said, "don't you understand what has happened; they have recognized two of their new idols, the Painter of 'Ishmael', and the little Ishmael himself."

So it came to pass, even before I knew what had happened, that I had unconsciously taken my first call, standing beside the artist who had painted my picture. The Duchesse laid a jewelled hand, so lightly that I scarcely noticed it, upon my head, and many women were blowing me kisses.

We turned away at last, and whilst the Painter helped to place an opera cloak around the gleaming white shoulder of Madame la Duchesse, the little Princess Marie turned to me and said, "I could love a man who plays the violin like that; if you play like that one day, I shall love you."

I bowed, "And would you then one day marry me, little Princess?"

"Marriage," she replied softly, "in our country, is a thing of State, but love——"

"Yes Princess, love?"

"Is a thing of the heart." The little Princess already knew her world.

I was listening to a second prophecy that evening and did not know it. Anyway it did not prevent me sleeping through the entire midnight journey back to Marseilles.

It had been a beautiful day—and night.

* * * *

THE BOOK OF MALIOL I

How shall I describe the unearthly influence that about this time came into my life, forming, although in dreams, a weird background almost invisible, yet always appearing at irregular intervals. Sometimes horrifying me with speechless terror and often charming me into wild delight.

What earth, or world, or creation, did you belong to, oh being, I came to know as Maliol?

You always appeared in dreams: were you a spirit of heaven or some devil strayed from those nethermost depths men call hell? I shall never know in this life.

Hereafter, I may be able either to know with absolute certainty or still continue, knowing nothing more than I know now.

I must go back a little way in order to arrange the events chronologically before your advent.

During one whole year I received several lessons a week, and those often of many hours duration, from Levinski.

He would stand with his mocking face, and sneering laugh, and unfold many secrets of violin playing to me, and indeed his knowledge seemed inexhaustible.

With the eternal cigarette in his mouth, he would drop ash all over the violin. Small cascades of ash would fall into whichever of the *f* holes of the instrument chanced to lie beneath the cigarette at the time.

All this had to be carefully shaken out afterwards, and even coaxed from sharp angles within the interior by means of rolling handfuls of warmed barley round inside the violin.

Yet he taught me much of the technique enabling me to produce the wonderful double-stopping for which I was one day to become famous. In the very beginning, for hours and months, he made me play, as it were, upon one hair for the full length of the bow. "The great Viotti had done this with this pupils," he said. A perfectly sustained tone, only a whisper, yet never altering in tone. How it made the wrist ache. Afterwards four perfect crescendos in drawing the length of one bow without a break, without that tone ever wavering or altering. My wrist used to

ache to the point of unbearability. He was a remorseless master.

"When you can do this with every single note upon the four strings," he said, "also every double combination, you will have mastered the secret of tone of the 'cellist C——, oh yes, he studied at the Conservatoire with me, we both acquired it after years of work, and only one other violinist possesses it.

"A great master, he never plays now, he is getting old, he has retired to a lovely Chateau near Warsaw. I speak of Moritz Liebner."

Levinski made me work for a year like a slave. I was not yet thirteen, but I did not resent the work, only his manner towards me.

I also hated his sudden and unexpected greed for something I dearly prized, which I will relate later on and in its proper place.

Worst of all were the hours he sat drinking Cognac with my grand'mère, for assuredly he had found out a congenial evil spirit wherewith to consort.

At this period my grand'mère became, if anything, more terrible, more morose and broodingly evil than before.

Levinski, after drinking for hours with the old woman, would ascend into the loft, where I was practising hard.

Breathing brandy over me with feverish and fiery breath, whilst he gave me directions, he would look at me with sombre and mocking eyes.

Frequently curses were my portion, alternated with bursts of extraordinary affection, for in some strange way, he seemed devoted to me, body and soul.

Yet I loathed him. Among other things, I hated him because he had made me promise to give him my Guadagnini violin, by way of payment for further lessons.

I promised to do so, I had no other choice. It was an iniquitous bargain, and he knew it.

"I will get you another violin," he said, "good enough for you to play upon for many years to come. I pine and crave for a fine violin, I have never possessed one, I must have this if your lessons are to continue."

Alas, the Painter, who had given me my cherished instrument, was no longer with me, or Levinski would not have dared to do or to suggest any of the things he demanded of me now.

It happened in this way. The Painter had sent for me one day. I went to the well-remembered studio. He looked radiantly happy as he greeted me.

"Little Michael," he said, "I am about to marry Madame la Duchesse D'Auvergne; wish me joy, Michael."

"M'sieur, indeed, indeed I do with all my heart," I replied, as I outstretched both my hands to him.

"But—you will go away?"

"Yes, Michael. I have given up the studio here in Marseilles; in future, I shall paint in Paris. After our marriage we are going away in the Duchesse's yacht for a long cruise, perhaps, for a whole year."

My face fell.

"But I have provided for you, little Michael. Oh yes, amidst my happiness you are not forgotten, my little brother of the bow. I have paid Levinski his fees for another year in advance, we shall be back before that year has passed, then you shall come to Paris. You shall live with us always."

"I am going to send you to the Paris Conservatoire to finish, and complete your education."

"M'sieur, alas, much may happen in a year."

"True, little Michael, but nothing that I have not foreseen and guarded against."

He was wrong, but I could not guess it then.

"They have elected me for the Academie, Michael. I am now one of the Immortals," he laughed gaily.

"You always were," I said absent-mindedly, for I was pondering many things.

"Now I am actually one."

"All happiness, M'sieur," I murmured, "all joy, all my unending congratulations, and my gratitude," I added; "yes, especially my gratitude."

"I am painting my future wife's portrait, Michael, yes and other pictures too, although we shall be journeying around the world in many strange waters.

"It isn't a little yacht you know, Michael, it is a beautiful big steamer, capable of doing many knots, with an entire crew on board; one of the salons aboard is an ideal studio."

I nodded; somehow I had a foreboding, my heart sank lower and lower.

"The world thinks the Duchesse is throwing herself away by only marrying a painter."

"Fortunately the Duchesse thinks differently, but she is very ambitious, Michael, she means to make me work, and declares she will not let me sell a single picture to anyone else, whether King, Prince or Prelate. As for museums, she declares that if I want to paint for posterity, I can in future adorn our mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain with my works."

"M'sieur, the Faubourg St. Germain, will you live there, then assuredly you will live in a palace, and yet you only need a studio," I said wistfully.

"It is there, Michael, a perfect studio all ready for me."

"You will never see me, m'sieur."

"Great heavens, why not?"

"It will be too grand for me to enter, ever."

"Listen, little Michael; when I have finished your education you will be as 'grand', to use your own words, as anybody perhaps in the whole world."

I shook my head; I felt very doleful and despondent just then.

"Don't shake your head in that wise way, Michael. When I explain something, you will see it is not wise to shake that wonderful little head of yours; in fact, it is folly, for it shows that you doubt. Michael, in all you ever do, or do not do, *never doubt yourself*."

"Have you not done so?"

"Very often, but it was all wrong: all doubt is fatal, Michael, and leads nowhere."

I remained silent.

"Do you know why I have such high hopes of you."

"No!"

"Levinski tells me you have progressed beyond all his wildest belief; he tells me you will one day be a very great violinist."

"Ah," it must have been a sort of vague repulsion upon my face that made the Painter ask:

"You dislike him?"

"Yes?"

"Why?"

"I don't know."

"He is a magnificent master, Michael?"

"Yes."

"Why is it you do not like him?"

"I don't know."

"Just an idea, perhaps, without any cause or reason.

"Yes, perhaps that's right, no cause or reason."

"Does he still drink?"

"He always smells of brandy—I think so."

"So does your aged grand'mère, Michael."

"Yes, I never seem to get away from it."

"You will get away from it all some day, soon, Michael. "Anyway you have thrived quite extraordinarily amidst exceptional surroundings, up to now. Nothing can happen to make them any different during another short year, then you shall come to us in Paris and finish your studies."

He was wrong, but I didn't know it.

"No need to ask you to work, Michael, for that time?"

"No!"

"I am told you are a little demon for work: you like what you have chosen?"

"Love it."

"There is nothing that you want different?"

"Nothing can be different."

The Painter crossed to the drawer of a cabinet and took from it three little packages. Two of them were flat and about the size of unmounted cabinet photographs.

"Can you guess, I wonder, what they are?" he asked.

"I cannot guess," I replied.

"Open yours."

I pulled at the ribbon bound round the tissue paper. Inside was a perfectly painted miniature of his famous picture "Ishmael" hanging in the Paris Salon.

"I have painted one for you, Michael, and the other is for the Duchesse; she begged me to do it for her; it is a little parting gift."

"I shall always treasure it, m'sieur."

He handed me the third packet unopened.

"There is a sum of money inside this, Michael, notes, in case of some sudden need. Put them away, and do not use them unless there is an especial and urgent reason for doing so. You might be in need of money some day, in a great hurry, it would be useful then."

He was right this time; he little knew how soon I should need that second packet.

I tied the two small packages together with unsteady hands; I couldn't trust myself to speak when I said good-bye to the only friend I had in the whole world.

It was a fatal mistake, although doubtless well-intended, when the Painter paid Adrian Levinski the heavy fees he

charged for my lessons, one whole year in advance.

Most likely the arrangement had been come to in order to avoid delay, or possibly the trouble of sending sums of money from foreign ports whilst the big steam yacht was cruising in far distant seas.

Levinski squandered the whole sum in less than three months.

From odd scraps of his conversation, I gathered the money had gone in gambling and other dubious but varied pleasures.

Upon another occasion, during one of his railings against life and fate, or whatever he choose to call it, I gathered that he had been compelled to sell or mortgage his house in Marseilles and was living in two small rooms.

My lessons were always given to me in the little garret loft at the back of our abode in the Rue Notte; therefore his change of residence did not affect me in any way, save that the time he devoted to my lessons grew further and further apart.

Whilst he grew more and more careless, I became all the more earnest in my studies and determination to get on.

Once I asked him why he did not instruct me as he had done before.

He retorted, with one of his smiles that seemed always half a sneer, that he was not receiving any money now for his tuition of me.

I remember what the Painter had told me, I was about to tell him it was untrue, but somehow or other I disliked him more than ever.

Upon this particular evening, he seemed to me inflamed with brandy, and he kept alternately half-opening and half-hugging a large and tattered-looking volume, bound in ancient vellum.

I asked him carelessly, possibly for want of a more congenial topic to talk about, if the volume was a work upon music.

"Something rarer than that, something that may be able to revolutionize and alter the very laws of—ah, why talk of it, you would not understand."

"Hand me your violin; here, this is the way to do the feather staccato." He flung open a page of the big violin work upon the shelf. "Here, watch me, see here—thus."

He was doubtless half-intoxicated, but he played the long difficult exercise flawlessly. It was the thing which

sounds almost magical, the dancing of the bow from string to string. Already I could accomplish this, but was not yet able to do it as he did.

"Play it," he commanded.

I did so.

"Yes," he muttered, "you're clear, incisive, you're coming on all right, you only want the sparkle—yes you only need to work more."

"I am working."

"And more lessons. I cannot teach you any longer without more money. You haven't got any, the old woman doubtless won't give any. Very well, there is another way. I give you more lessons, you give me your Guadagnini violin. I want such a one badly."

"I must have a violin to play upon," I remonstrated.

"I will find you another good enough for you: well, is it to be more lessons?"

"Yes."

"You will then give me the violin in exchange."

"Yes."

"A promise."

"I have said 'Yes'!"

My heart was heavy, the violin lesson seemed to drag on and on for hours.

That night when the lesson was finished I absolutely hated him. My cherished Guadagnini that the Painter had given me was the one thing in all the world I never wished to part with.

Moreover he had spent the money the Painter had given him, he had cheated us both, and now he demanded the violin as well. Yet I must go on learning, I knew that.

I had promised him the violin, he should have it, but he had by meanness and greed raised a barrier he would never be able to break down, and he never did, although afterwards, in more sober moments, he tried very hard, I will say this for him.

I put the violin away at length regretfully, I could no longer look upon it as my own. I must henceforth give my love to the music alone, and bestow no love, as hitherto, upon the instrument now that I knew it would soon belong to him.

I locked the garret up, and descended the steep wooden stairs. As I reached the little kitchen-sitting-room, a strange sight met my eyes.

The room was almost in darkness, except for one faintly burning candle, and a sort of greenish flame flickering in a bowl. The large ragged vellum-covered book was opened out upon the table.

Over the ragged pages, my grandmother, looking more like an eldritch witch than ever, was bending with Levinski. They seemed to be reciting some passage from the volume, repeating it again and again.

Her mutterings were in the hoarse croaking voice that she always spoke with now, he in half-frightened tones that seemed to tremble as if he dreaded the thing he was saying.

Suddenly they stopped. I had entered quietly enough in my slippers.

They gazed fearfully at each other, four wicked eyes met each other across the flickering candle light. They seemed frightened to gaze round.

"Who are you?" queried the old crone.

"It is only me, Michael; what are you doing?"

"Bah!" she snarled, "limb of a devil, go to bed, up to bed quick, don't dare linger."

I went to bed sadly, but readily enough. I must have been asleep some short time, so I reckoned afterwards, for I had no watch, when I was awakened by a terrible cry of fear followed by banging and smashing, and a voice hoarse with terror.

I had become so used to my grandmother's performances with fire-irons and furniture during the night, that it did not any longer alarm me.

I sat bolt upright in bed, however, when I heard my grandmother shriek out in French. "In hell's name, what have you unloosed, it's here in this room, there in that corner. Quick! control it, the thing's slinking out, ah!" she shrieked, "up the stairs to Michael's room."

I was out of bed in a flash, something soft, yet like a big body, seemed to rub against the little door of my room outside. The door shook as I slid down the great old-fashioned wooden bar that latched the door.

Outside I could hear something breathing with a great regular purr.

I stood the other side of the door in my sleeping shirt, white and still, with a horrible sickening feeling that I had never before known, creeping all over me.

For the first time in my life I was afraid.

After what may have been seconds or may have been hours, that movement against the door ceased.

Some sort of footsteps that seemed *padded* and as if they sprang as they moved, and did not walk, drew away from the door.

I continued to sit upon the bed white and chilled, quite silent, and feeling unutterably alone until the dawn crept in.

It could scarcely have looked more pale than I did.

I could never stand another night of horror like this. I must do something, I must go away, right away, but where? How? To whom? What was I to do?

I thought for a long while with my head sunk in my hands. There was no answer that I could give myself, there was simply no way.

Events were to bring my release quicker than I knew.

The broad morning sunshine seemed to scare away, as it always does, all the terrors inside that room, and all the unknown terrors outside as well. Notwithstanding, I opened the door cautiously and descended to the kitchen-sitting-room. My grandmother was alone. She had made the morning coffee, and she was looking at me cunningly, but anxiously, I thought.

"Have you slept?"

"No!"

"Why?"

I sat down to the simple breakfast, I was not destined to eat that day, with little enough appetite.

"Why?" she demanded again.

"You should know why."

"How should I know?"

"Something was in the house last night; it came outside my door—something that was horribly evil."

Her eyes opened wide and then contracted. The action appeared automatic, as if she could not control them.

"Your precious teacher was here and he is evil enough; you heard him."

"It wasn't a human being that came," I ventured to answer boldly.

The effect of my words seemed to produce some sort of paroxysm or fit; she gave a sort of shriek and pointed wildly towards the corner of the room.

"It was there," she shrieked, "it moved and slunk round and round; it was a black panther; take it away—

take it away—has it gone?" She was foaming at the mouth and half-lying across the table.

Without more ado I fled for the doctor.

The doctor had never given it a name but he had always given me very definite instructions to call him immediately my grandmother displayed any symptoms such as she was exhibiting this morning.

The doctor's visit really only served to precipitate matters. He gave her medicine and advice, both of which I should imagine, must have been thrown away.

To me he gave definite instructions. "Whenever you can do so unobserved," he said, "either dilute the Cognac she takes, or pour it away, all but a little. She forgets how much she takes.

"Take care she doesn't see you do this, or she might be capable of doing anything. You understand?"

"Yes!"

"It is disgraceful you should be here at all; at times she is three parts, if not wholly, mad. Have you no other relatives or friends you could go to live with?"

"No."

"It is a pity."

"M'sieur, it is a responsibility."

"Yes, yes, quite so, horrible, horrible, give her the medicine I have ordered."

"Yes."

"Send to me at once, if I am required."

The next occasion the doctor entered our premises in the Rue Notte, was not to attend my grand'mère, but myself.

So many things happened so swiftly, and in so short a space of time, that my pen runs away too fast in recording them. I must take events in their proper order.

For some little time, neither my grand'mère nor Levinski attempted to hold séances, or whatever they called them, in the dark, yet many times in passing through the kitchen-sitting-room, I found them poring over the big ragged vellum book.

A chance observation made by Levinski, to the old woman, did not help in any way to enlighten me, and I paid no heed to what he said, until long afterwards.

As near as I can recollect, these were the words he used. Their conferences were always held in secret, and I was doubtless not intended to hear any of their doings.

"Our first effort was incredible, frightening, but the book says the animal always appears first, then the forerunner or messenger of the One, or even the One himself, according to how the recipient is attuned."

"Then bring the other," snapped the old woman, "not the black panther, do you hear me."

I shivered and viewed the Cognac bottle apprehensively as I passed.

There was only one bottle upon the table and that was nearly empty. Yet one never knew; if my relative started babbling about black panthers one might reasonably expect the worst.

Upon this particular hot summer evening I made my way along the quays to the waterside, and joined other ragamuffins of the city, who generally choose the sunny evening hour in which to relieve the tedium of their various occupations by bathing. We often scrapped and fought like wild cats, yet generally managed to get along fairly amicably together.

We could all swim like minnows, whilst competition among the harbour boys in diving for coins made at any rate for efficiency.

Dusk was setting in as I resumed my clothes and made my way homewards.

In Marseilles one becomes accustomed to meet people of many nationalities, but I never remember to have seen such a number of strange-looking foreign sailors as thronged the quays that night as I made my way home.

What far seas had they come from, were the ships which brought them laden with the heaped up riches of the earth, I wondered.

Some of them look like pirates, I thought, and I laughed to myself. "You are silly, Michael, there are no pirates nowadays, or if so, none that you will ever see," and I sighed. I should have loved to meet a few real pirates.

I opened the little door of our curio-shop. The small cracked-sounding bell tinkled its warning, as usual.

I became aware that someone was standing behind me as I was entering.

I turned round and beheld a sailor far stranger in appearance than any I had noticed along the quays.

He towered above me, he appeared to me a veritable giant in height, as he was in reality. A brilliant silken

band was bound round his head; hanging from his ears were two barbaric-looking gold rings. His face was tanned a mahogany brown, his huge hands and arms were of the same colour, burnt in by the sun of goodness alone knows what foreign clime.

His cheek-bones were the highest and most prominent I have ever seen upon a human face, and amounted to a deformity; set immediately above them glittered the most evil eyes I have ever seen. His eyes were the glittering, darting eyes of a reptile, and a reptile of a dangerous species at that.

I felt myself unable to speak or move; over me came the same feeling I had experienced upon the night I had thrown the wooden bar across my bedroom door, when something, I knew not what, had seemed to be moving outside, waiting to enter.

The wicked eyes continued to glitter at me, and over me; they were nauseating yet mesmeric.

He spoke, his voice was rasping and horrible. The words he uttered were in French, blurred by the accent of some other tongue.

"This is the right place; I have reached my journey's end."

I pulled myself together, and resolved that his journey should indeed end, and moreover upon the pavement outside, with the door safely shut upon him.

I had all but closed it, when by a movement of one arm, he swept both the stout shop door and myself back, with as much ease as he would have brushed aside a bulrush.

He strode straight through the shop, littered with curios as it was and unlighted, as if he could see in the dark. Straight on he strode into the kitchen-sitting-room. I could only judge of the effect his sudden appearance must have caused, for he stood within the door, his huge bulk blotting out the light.

I heard the crash of a glass falling upon the floor, an oath from Levinski, the grating of a table being pushed either backward or forward, a sort of whining cry from my grandmother.

Then there was silence for a space.

The man with the earrings moved into the room. I crept into the deep shadow at the right-hand side of the door.

I could see the whole room. The sailor turned his

darting, viperish eyes upon the two occupants of the room. Their faces were white, and seemed terror-stricken.

Levinski recovered himself first, but his voice sounded uneven and shaken as he asked: "Who are you?"

The question remained unanswered.

"Where do you come from?"

"I have been sent; is that enough?"

Levinski nodded. "Sit down," he said huskily.

Levinski poured out nearly a tumbler of Cognac and pushed it somewhat fearfully towards the strange apparition. Seated, the sailor's form filled up half of the small table facing them.

The man drained the contents of the tumbler at a gulp, as if he were only in a parched land and he had been offered a glass of water.

He abruptly thrust one of his huge red-brown hands into a pocket of the strange garments he wore, and produced a small faded green silk bag, wound round with red cord.

Untying the cord, he shook the little bag over the table, and out of it slid an oval-shaped white stone, about the size of a five-shilling piece.

The stone seemed to shine in certain lights, as he played with it, lifting it up and down over the table.

The sailor fixed his eyes upon my grand'mère's face. "You have the money, you will pay the price for this stone?"

"The shop is closed," snapped the old woman. "If you have only come to trade you can go away, the stone is of no value."

"No value," answered the sailor in his rasping voice. "I will explain its value."

"I am not buying, anyway. Who are you?"

"Who I am, I do not think you would care for me to explain; oh no, you wouldn't like it, nor would your master."

Levinski and my grandmother exchanged further glances.

"Perhaps he is not what we think," she told Levinski.

"Yes, yes," said Levinski, "it must be."

The instinct of the dealer was paramount in the old woman. "I do not know how he got in, he only wants to sell, I am not buying. I do not deal in stones; this is a rubbishy one of no value."

"I should always have got in, entered here whenever I pleased." The man turned swiftly towards Levinski.

His eyes and his huge earrings glittered as he moved. "You must have known someone was coming, someone was expected."

"How? Explain——"

"Because of this written manuscript." One of the man's huge brown hands moved across the table and closed over the ragged vellum-covered book, which was invariably outspread late every evening, whenever my grand'mère and Levinski had what they termed "a sitting".

"I take this away with me; it has been stolen for a long time; it has to be replaced. It is not a safe or a wise thing that this should be about." He tapped the vellum cover with his horny brown finger-nails. The contact made a sound almost metallic.

"I refuse to part with it," growled Levinski.

The sailor rose to his feet slowly. His tremendous height and strength were fully apparent.

"You have no choice, I compel you." "And you," he snarled, turning to my grand'mère, exposing his long pointed yellow teeth, more appropriate to some wild forest animal than a human being. "You give your share of the payment from that locked drawer there behind you. All the money that is in it."

My grandmother also rose and folded her arms.

I noticed that for once in her life she neither looked fierce, nor frightening as usual; as a matter of fact she appeared thoroughly cowed, but she made a sort of effort to brave the situation out.

"I believe you are only a common robber, I will not give you any money, I will call the gendarmes."

I was about to do the same thing myself.

Hidden in the doorway, I had an excellent opportunity of bolting out for assistance, and was upon the point of doing so, when I was arrested by the sailor laughing, if one could distinguish it by this name.

If such a thing were possible, his laugh was even more repulsive than all his other unattractive qualities put together.

He emitted a low chuckling gurgle.

"Why, by all means call the gendarmes, we shall all have much to explain. I do not know whose story will

sound the strangest. You hesitate woman, and your master also. Well, shall I go myself and bring them in?"

My grand'mère seemed to make up her mind suddenly and for some reason resolved to make the best of a bad job.

She took a key, unlocked the drawer of the cabinet hanging upon the wall, where she kept the ready money for the shop, together with the day's takings, and flung the contents upon the table. There were some notes, a few pieces of gold, and a good sprinkling of silver.

I knew my grand'mère had much more money than this, but she never revealed to anyone where it was hidden.

The sailor gathered the notes and money from the table, thrusting it all into his huge foreign-looking jumper, that had already swallowed the vellum-bound manuscript.

He helped himself to more Cognac unasked and resumed his seat at the table.

"Now the price is paid, you shall know the manner of thing you have bought."

The blurred accent of some other land, combined with his horrible rasping voice, made it difficult for me to follow the sailor's French, but I was enabled to understand most of his amazing harangue.

"You keep a shop for curios," he said. "You buy curios, you must have seen many, but lying here," he touched the shiny white stone as he talked, "you have the greatest curio in the world. There is nothing so strange, no, not even within all the strange lands I have been through."

My grand'mère helped herself to all the remaining Cognac in the bottle; it all but filled a tumbler.

"I should say," she growled, "for a curio, you would need much to compare with yourself."

The sailor ignored the interruption.

It was the last remark my grand'mère ventured to make, beyond getting up somewhat unsteadily and opening another bottle of Cognac, which she held in her hand, bestowing alternate potations between herself and Levinski.

She took, I could see, a cunning delight in knowing that the sailor was no longer enabled to indulge in her favourite beverage.

I am convinced to this day that she was far more concerned about this, than the import of what the sailor was relating. The Cognac was having its deadening,

stupefying effect upon both herself and Levinski.

The sonorous tones of the sailor's voice, the droning monotony of what must have been an unusually long monologue for him, doubtless combined in their effect to produce somnolence, because long before he had finished speaking, both Levinski and my grand'mère were asleep—Levinski with his head tilted back upon his chair, my grand'mère with her head sunk upon her folded arms across the table.

The sailor finished his strange recital at length. He regarded them both sardonically.

The silence succeeding after his voice ceased, seemed eerie.

"So my audience is asleep; one of the strangest stories in all the world and they cannot keep awake to listen. What matter? *I spoke for other ears to hear.*"

I shrunk silently further back into the black shadow of the door. Could he know I was there? Did he know I was listening?

He rose to go. He seemed to be talking about the stone still lying upon the table, where he had dropped it from its bag, which was placed beside it with the red cord that had bound it together.

"I am well glad to be rid of you; you could never bring me anything I wanted. Will you ever bring anyone anything they crave for?

"Verily not until you reach the hands of such an one who has not held you for many countless years, how long, ah! And how many years, I wonder?"

The giant figure pushed open the door behind which I was concealed and strode out through the shop into the night without a word.

I crept to the shop door, and as quietly as I could, I double barred it and turned the big lock as well, placing the iron key upon a shelf.

I felt a little safer then; anyway the horrible visitor was out of the place.

I did not mind darkness when it was only darkness, or yet being alone.

A small ray of warm light patchworked patterns of comforting gold upon the old oak floor from the lighted room beyond.

I sat down upon a little heap of old Persian rugs which were part of the stock, put my head in my hands, and tried

to collect my thoughts in the silence—the partial darkness.

I heard the old wall clock in the back room strike one. Was it really one o'clock in the morning, or was the wheezy old clock only striking the single note as usual, for a half-hour?

I never ascertained which, and by reason of what happened afterwards, I shall never know.

Yet it serves to show how vividly even trivial and utterly unimportant things are sometimes indelibly stamped upon the memory.

My mind was then absorbed in reconstructing the amazing, and well-nigh incredible story the sailor had related to two people who were fast asleep.

Every word he said had been heard by myself behind the door. In my young but unusually active brain, I tried to separate the real from the unreal.

First of all there was the sailor himself. He was undoubtedly real.

Where did he come from? Nobody would ever know.

Had he been bidden by anyone to find the manuscript book, which the two in the adjoining room had pored over night after night, and which the sailor alleged had been stolen?

Perhaps he had been commissioned to find it, had located it, seized it, and would get some great reward for its restoration. Had he watched the place unobserved? Did he know that my grandmother kept money in the cupboard drawer on the wall? In that case would he not come again? I shuddered at the possibility. Why did he demand the money for the white shining stone? Was he merely a robber working in a more than usually original way?

If this were so, what was to have prevented him from taking the stone away with him, since he was only dealing with two sleeping people, and an utterly helpless child who was hidden behind a door?

He left the stone because, he said, the thing had brought him no good. He had expressed his thoughts aloud when he had genuinely wondered what effect the stone would have if it fell into other, and, as he seemed to indicate, better hands.

Last of all in my mind, I came to the amazing story itself, which the man had related.

I envisaged the whole picture in my mind again.

His glittering viper-like eyes, the prominent high cheek-bones, below them the nodding earrings of gold, flashing where the light caught them, the gaudy silk band round the man's head, the giant form, betokening strength.

Was he some denizen from another world, or only a foreigner from some land I did not know anything about?

He had said the white shiny stone had waded through seas of blood in its history.

The sailor himself looked as if he might have done so, and still survived.

Think as I would, I always came back to the actual story, whether true, or a cleverly-told fable.

He declared the stone was a minute portion of the very stone upon which Jacob, afterwards the Patriarch of Israel, had once dreamed and lain his head. A tiny fragment he (Jacob) afterwards took away with him, and kept as a rememberance.

The whole stone upon which Jacob's head rested had been a portion of a Heavenly Throne, shattered and overthrown when the legions of angels had warred in Heaven.

Some shattered part of the stone had been flung to earth with the warring ones, when Lucifer had been overwhelmed and thrust forth.

Afterwards this tiny portion of the strangely marvellous thing figured again in history as the very stone with which David was enabled to slay the giant Goliath. It was believed to be the only sacred jewel in the world that could give to its possessor the *Wish of his Heart.* David kept the stone, it was declared, and through its means afterwards became the greatest harpist of the age, and was thus enabled to charm the madness from Saul, King of Israel, by his wondrous playing. It was subsequently possessed by the great Solomon, and accounted for many of the wonders of his reign.

Either ignorant of its supposed attributes, or no longer believing in its powers for good, King Solomon is supposed to have given it to the Queen of Sheba—and after that——

I did not know very much about history, ancient or modern, but I sickened when I thought of half the sailor had related, that had followed this jewel stone through the ages.

Orgies beyond belief, horrors beyond conception,

lightning-like flashes upon the past, had its presence caused through all the ages and all over the world. Verily it must have been, as he, the sailor, said, through a Sea of Blood.

The jewel stone had never again seemed to fall into any hands for good. I gravely doubted whether it could ever have been any portion of a Heavenly thing; it must, I thought, be overwhelmingly and unutterably evil. The sort of magic stone that even a devil would hesitate to possess, after knowing its possible potentialities.

What did I know of Jacob? Absolutely nothing.

According to the sailor, he had seen legions of angels ascending and descending under the influence of this stone.

Anyway, that sounded less appalling than any of the other things in connection with the jewel. Provided there are any angels, I added to myself mentally; even if he only imagined them, there must be something good sometimes about the thing.

Then there was David again. I was equally ignorant about the life, reign, or doings of this king. Really he didn't interest me in the least, yet a fact the sailor had mentioned took instant possession of my whole fancy.

David, the sailor had averred, recovered the stone and by its means became the most wonderful harpist of his age, so that he was enabled to charm away the madness of Saul, King of Israel. Who was Saul, I wondered? Why was he mad?

David at any rate was a musician. At last I was thrilled, that appealed to me. The stone then must be capable of some good, if any of the story could be believed.

If the possession of a stone, with unusual talismanic powers, could make a man the greatest harper of his age, although that age was dead and gone long since, could it still possess sufficiently magical qualities to make a man the greatest violinist in a more modern time, and upon a comparatively more modern instrument?

To this point had my thoughts turned; upon this were they focussed when I rose from the Persian rugs, and went into the next room.

I walked cautiously lest I should wake either of the dozing ones, and stood by the table in the place the foreign sailor had lately occupied.

As if to remind me of his hateful presence, there remained a strong odour of musk, or some foreign perfume,

something that must have clung to his clothing, resembling newly-mixed Indian ink, only much stronger.

I sniffed it aside in disgust, and took the white shining stone in my hand.

What manner of stone could it be? It was fairly thick in depth, but not really heavy, as I weighed it in the palm of my hand. I looked into the depths of it. Sometimes it seemed to have the untroubled appearance of the moon reflected in a piece of water, yet now and again one caught illusive changes like faint mist clearing away from a lake.

I had seen opals in the jewellers' shops, a white topaz, aquamarines; no, I did not think it could be any of these stones. Was it merely my fancy, or had the stone become suddenly warm and alive in my hands? I closed the fingers of my left hand over it lightly to make certain of this point. Undoubtedly a sort of subtle thrill was communicated to me. Perhaps merely a post-impression of the sailor's glowing romance.

Whilst I continued to hold the stone, my attention was drawn to the still half-filled bottle of Cognac, and I remembered the doctor's injunctions to pour it away whenever I could. When my grandmother awoke, she would think she had finished it, and, most likely, not open another bottle. If she started again upon this one, she would undoubtedly be ill.

I lifted the bottle from the table, and poured its contents down the little kitchen sink at the end of the room.

I was returning to replace the jewel stone I still clasped, and had stood the empty bottle again upon the table as a preparatory measure to creeping upstairs to bed, when I perceived, too late, that the old woman was awake.

She was watching me, her eyes ablaze with such hatred, that it seemed to choke the words she would have uttered.

She seized me with one powerful hand round my throat, before I could move, and raising herself, she swung the empty Cognac bottle upon my head with all her strength.

I think I gave an agonized cry before I saw hundreds of moving moons and stars, and shining stones like the one the sailor had brought.

I was falling, falling over worlds, tumbling down always into space, into a bottomless pit of utter darkness.

* * * *

I awoke in my bedroom at the top of the stairs; I do not know how many days afterwards. My head was bound up and ached terribly.

Yes, it was my own small bedroom. I could see familiar corners and angles poor and plain, but re-assuring after having fallen into a bottomless pit.

I recognized the voices in the room. One was the Doctor's, the other Levinski.

Levinski spoke first. "He will live?"

"Yes!"

"Will his reason be affected?"

"I cannot tell yet, I hope not. That old she-devil struck him with the thick base of the bottle."

"Better for him if his head had been broken."

"Why?"

"A wound you can see and stitch up is better than an injury you have to guess at. He may have vivid and startling dreams, perhaps even delusions, for a long while he will have terrible headaches. If the woman returns she must be put away, locked up; she is dangerous."

"Could you have prevented such a blow?"

"No, I was too late, nobody could have prevented it."

"I wish she had given me the blow instead. I am devoted to him. I will nurse him, look after him."

"Bien. Give him only milk, sometimes a little ice in it."

The speakers left the room noiselessly and went downstairs.

I turned round in my bed; how my head ached, a dull awful ache. I was to know that dull aching at intervals, for many a year to come.

One of my hands, the left, was doubled up and painful. The fingers of the hand seemed dead without any feeling, at all in them. Stiff and numb as they were, I fumbled at them with my right hand, and something dropped on the counter-pane of the bed.

I groped about, I couldn't see much underneath the bandages. After a little while I found it and lifted it up. It was a small white shining stone. I tucked it under the pillow and fell asleep.

After many days I recovered sufficiently to get up and sit in a chair before the open door, facing the Rue Notte.

I remember one day a circus passed. I had an excellent view of all the animals and the show cars.

One great car with gilded bars, containing a sort of tableau set inside, attracted me enormously.

The circus had come from Warsaw. What did I know about Warsaw? Something that already interested me. It came back to my memory.

The town of Warsaw had been mentioned to me as being the finest Conservatoire at that time for violinists. Two of the greatest exponents of the instrument were Professors at the Warsaw Conservatoire. I made a mental note of Warsaw.

Sometimes I watched for my grandmother's return and always waited for her. With a childish sense of injury, I thought she ought to return and apologise.

I resolved that with becoming magnanimity I would immediately forgive her. Although I watched and waited, she never returned. I never saw her again, nor did I ever hear what had become of her, although I did everything in my power to find out.

From the time she hit me over the head and wandered out into the night, doubtless believing she had killed me, no trace of her could ever be found. Her disappearance was probably unknown in the vicinity, as we had no neighbours who took any interest in us, and no friends.

My grandmother's appearance and manners were not propitious for the amenities of life, and never extended to wishing folks even good morning or good night.

Even when my grandmother was in the place to attend to business, days and often weeks would go by before customers came into the curio-shop to buy anything.

Just as frequently, lots of people would come in one after the other as if they were following a set plan. I suppose it is always so with old curio-shops of the nature of the one we kept.

Not a customer entered, to interrupt my reveries at the open door, during the time I was getting well.

I noticed about this time that Levinski commenced to evince an unusual interest in me, a sort of mingled air of guardianship and proprietorship, which vaguely filled me with distrust and alarm.

I had received a great shock from which I had only partly recovered and I was nervy and full of forebodings at this time, both with regard to my grandmother's disappearance and my own future. I felt within myself that I couldn't endure any more.

It only needed a revelation of Levinski's schemes and intentions, to key me up to the resolution I had been slowly forming in my own mind to bolt away, no matter where, and to confide my project to nobody.

"I don't think your grandmother is coming back, Michael," Levinski remarked one evening. He smoked successive cigarettes as usual, and continued: "She either thinks she murdered you and doesn't mean to come back, or by this time she is dead herself. What do you say?"

I shook my head. I had nothing to say.

"I can find no money in the place; I have searched."

I regarded him coldly.

"So you see, Michael, you will have to give me the Guadagnini violin some time during the next few days. I will sell it, it will fetch a good sum, and you and I can run the curio-shop here together. I think we could make quite a good thing of it. Of course I will find you another violin; anyway it belongs to me now by our agreement for the further lessons I have given you. I will come to live here and look after you; it's quite impossible for you to be left here alone, and you have no friends."

"No, I have no friends."

The finer inflection of my childish sneer undoubtedly escaped his notice.

"Won't that be a splendid arrangement, eh Michael?"

"Oh! yes, admirable," I replied.

He went on smoking more interminable cigarettes.

"I am playing away at concerts the next two nights; I will arrange it all for the end of the week. You agree?"

"Oh yes!"

"I am sure we can make something of this shop."

"Yes," I thought to myself bitterly, "he will make the sitting-room, at all events, a drinking den."

I should merely exchange the guardianship of one drunkard for another. There and then I resolved I would never do so.

Levinski lit yet another cigarette and rose to go.

"Do you mind being left in this place alone?"

Again the subtle irony was undetected, as I replied: "No, I prefer it."

He paused at the shop door as I was about to close it for the night.

"By the way, Michael, did you see or hear anything of

a big foreign sailor, who came here the night your grandmother—er—the night of your accident?"

"A foreign sailor?" I echoed blankly.

"Yes! He brought some sort of stone here to sell. I think it was very valuable; it was upon the table in the back room when I last saw it. When I went to look for it again, I could not find it. Where could it have gone? It has completely disappeared."

I was wondering to myself why the blow upon my head had changed me. I seemed to have suddenly become a different Michael from the Michael I had been before.

I seemed to myself to have suddenly grown alert and cunning.

"Of what are you thinking, Michael?"

"What can I know about the things of which you are asking?"

"True you were in bed, I had forgotten, but it is very strange."

"What is very strange?"

"The disappearance of the sailor, the disappearance of the stone. I didn't see him go. The stone was there, I didn't see that go either."

"Then what were you doing at the time?" I asked.

For a moment he looked rather sheepish. "I think I must have been asleep," he said.

"Ah, yes, you probably dreamed it all."

Levinski looked at me curiously for a moment, then he closed his eyes, as if trying to remember something that had escaped him.

"That is a possible explanation which has not occurred to me. I wonder." He seemed lost in thought.

I waited silent beside the door.

"Good night, Michael."

"Good night!"

I closed the door behind him. For aught I knew I should never see Adrian Levinski again.

I barred the door, leaving the little cracked-toned bell lightly swung from its iron suspender to the shutter of the door, so that if my grandmother returned, the slightest shake would set it ringing.

I mounted the stairs slowly and went to bed. Before going to sleep I assured myself that the shining white stone was still beneath my pillow, where I had always hidden it.

I drew it out, and looked at it in the candle-light. It seemed to swim in light, like a tiny lake lighted by far-off silvern stars. Whilst I held it in my hand I said: "If you made David great, cannot you help Michael also?" I replaced the stone underneath my pillow, blew out the candle, and went to sleep.

* * * *

That night I had the first vivid and startling dream of the series of dreams that descended upon me in sleep, from time to time, as the years went on.

I first became aware of a scene dimly lighted, but yet I knew it so well. Where had I seen it before, when had I been there?

Then I realized that it was the familiar desert background of the picture the Painter had depicted so wonderfully in the painting of "Ishmael".

I was not in the landscape, I was looking at it from outside.

Something moved between the rocks, and approached me over the scrub and tangled wild thorn.

A great black panther appeared. Its soft fur was like black seal-skin, its eyes were gleaming and yellow as the colour of Cognac.

In my dream I drew back in fear and shut my eyes. When I seemed to re-open them another figure stood and watched me.

A man with a marvellous face and very tall, dressed in flowing robes, with a head-dress like that of an Ancient Egyptian Prince, waited beside the black panther.

No one ever speaks in dreams, and yet all speech is understood, all meaning is clear.

So it became evident to my senses that this wonderful apparition was speaking to me, whilst I gazed upon a living picture. The black panther rubbed against its master.

"Do not be afraid of him, Michael, he will not hurt you. *He knows you, he has seen you before.* I am Maliol, a God of Music; we have heard of you.

"If I give you the greatest gift in all the world—for I can bestow such upon you—what use will you make of it, I wonder?

"Will you use it only for the highest purposes of good,

the greatest purposes of art, from now and for always?"

He whom I now know as Maliol, waved his hand.

In response, hundreds of dim forms dressed like himself appeared in a group around him.

"Shall we grant him the gift?" I understood him to ask of them. The entire group of figures around him appeared to give assent.

"Then know, as the gift is wonderful, beyond all knowledge and precedent, save only once before upon earth, so the conditions are great and lasting, and most terrible are the consequences if those conditions are not kept in letter, in spirit, and in truth.

"I will give you music such as the earth knows not now; you shall write it and play it.

"You shall play upon the instrument you love, with far greater power and beauty than any man who has ever lived or shall ever live; you shall be as an immortal with a gift of unlimited power and beauty. You shall become the wonder of a world, you will receive the worship of your fellow beings.

"But the condition is this. You shall never love any thing or being upon earth so much as the gift I give unto you. Never worship any thing or being like unto the gift you will hold. Should you do so, it will be taken away from you. Not perhaps at once; it might even be taken from you slowly and gradually, yet the penalty would be so heavy, it would be better for you if you had never been born."

He I now knew as Maliol, turned to the others. "Is it beyond his strength?" he seemed to ask. "No, Maliol!" they all replied. "Give unto him this great gift."

Maliol appeared in my dream to seize my hands.

He murmured over each one in turn. "This, for the strings, this for the bow. Subtle and perfect and wonderful, become like the flowers. Move with the wings of night, stretch forth and plead to the sun, open the hearts of all, touch you the soul of everyone. Be perfect and never cease.

"Now will I take your oath in exchange."

Within that picture but yet outside it, I raised my hands above me and repeated a terrible oath, the form of which I know not, the burning words of which I cannot remember.

As they departed I tried to shriek aloud to Maliol that I could not do all this alone. I could not see the way. "A way will be given to you," he seemed to say.

I awoke, daylight was breaking.

The day was very young, but I seemed to have aged within myself a hundred, hundred years.

* * * *

Before I had any breakfast I flew to my violin and bow. With a sense of blank disappointment, I realized there was no difference in my playing, except perhaps that I could not play quite as well as usual, owing to my illness and not having practised for some time.

"It was only a dream then, after all," I muttered, but it seemed strangely real, and most of all, the oath they made me take.

How was I to escape Levinski, how was I to get away? Where could I go on the comparatively small sum of money the Painter had given me?

Maliol had seemed to assure me in my dream that a way would be found.

Only a dream, I thought, sadly enough, to myself. So easy to make promises in a dream.

I played my violin right on through that day.

As the night came on I moved into the shop and played there. The door into the street was shut and locked. I lit a light, pulled down the shop blinds, and continued to play, with a sort of desperation. I reasoned to myself that if I was compelled to give up my beloved Guadagnini violin to Levinski, I might just as well take as long a farewell of it as possible.

About nine o'clock somebody suddenly lurched against the door of the shop, then there came a knocking.

I had resolved in my mind it must be my grandmother, so I went and opened it.

Swaying upon his legs, somewhat unsteadily, was a tall well-dressed man, his long fawn-coloured overcoat was open. I saw he was in evening dress, and knew at once that he was English.

"Hello!" he said, in a quite friendly way, after which effort of speech, he lurched heavily inwards.

I endeavoured to steady him.

"Whee'sh the old woman?" he asked vacantly.

"M'sieur, she is away at present, what can I do for you?"

"I wansh the two pow-pow, powdered blue, can't say it again, but blue, un'stand, blue Ming bowls."

Herewith he sat down unexpectedly, as he had not seen them, upon the pile of Persian rugs.

I had nothing to fear from this visitor, so I closed the shop door.

"Pay for 'em now," he continued, gazing round and appearing quite contented that he had found a safe seat.

"Recognized damn shop as I passed, damned old woman, damned swindling price, but damn fine Ming bowls."

"M'sieur," I ventured, "I do not think you would care to burden yourself to-night with two delicate bowls which would easily smash. I will keep them for you, and bring them round to you in the morning. Would that not suit you better m'sieur?"

"M'sieur be damned, I'm—Marquis of Cranleigh—damned drunk too. S'pose you don't understand damned drunk people round here, donsh see 'em eh?"

"On the contrary, M'sieur le Marquis, I never see anything else."

He burst out into a loud shout of laughter, half-rolling over upon the heap of Persian rugs, as he did so. My answer appeared to have struck him as the most humorous thing he had ever heard in his life.

"Funny kid," he gurgled, "damned funny kid."

He swayed about so much in his merriment, I thought his seat upon the heap of rugs most insecure. After a side lurch, he tried to steady himself, and finally sprawled upon the floor. As I hastened forward to help raise him, I noticed that a long, smooth, leather pocket-book had fallen out opened, from his inner overcoat pocket. It remained where it had fallen, beside the pile of Persian rugs.

Oh! Michael, from that moment you became a little blackguard, an ordinary, low, cunning, common thief, as bad as any of the young harbour rascals, or worse.

I meant to have the thing from the moment it dropped. I could see it was stuffed and bulging with bank-notes. Deliberately I turned him away from it as I helped him to his feet.

Whilst he swayed I pushed the pocket-book with my foot, further under the rugs.

"I say," he stuttered, with a hiccup or two interspersed between his remarks. "I say, you're a jolly sort of kid, are—aren't you?"

"I'm a little blackguard," I replied calmly.

Once more he went off into hiccuping laughter.

"Damned funny kid, 'markable face most—re—what I've just said. Now, when I came in, when I—what was I saying, oh—yes, when I got here some—some—someone was playing fiddle."

"I was!"

"You——"

"Yes, M'sieur le Marquis!"

"Ha! Ha!" he chuckled, "M'sieur le Marquis, damned funny, sounds like the damn French Revolution—'markable kid—dam 'strordnary. Now it hap—hap—happens that I simply—'dore the fiddle, play fiddle."

I took my violin and bow from off a rare old buhl table, displayed in the shop for sale, where I had placed them when I opened the door.

I tuned the violin swiftly, knowing that at any moment he might discover the loss of his pocket-book.

I faced him boldly and played deliberately to charm him into forgetfulness of anything else. Levinski had always made me memorise my pieces. I only used music for the exercises and studies.

Strange that I should have played to him that night the Schubert "Ava Maria", with its golden singing double-stopping, and its broad harmonized chords of Amens.

I went on to Corelli, with his silvery old-world runs, Gessler's "Serenade and Caprice", with showered arpeggios.

I remembered before I finished, that this inebriated Marquis was the only audience I had ever played to in my life. He seemed strangely sobered after a while.

"My God!" he said, "my God, you can play, you're a fine little artist."

"Not yet," I said, "I hope to be some day."

He got up, and he could stand fairly well, I noticed.

"You are now," he said, "and here am I drinking, playing cards, and buying horses in Marseilles, and the only thing I shall remember of the damned town is a kid playing the violin like an angel or like a—like a god."

I remembered my dream and the words Maliol had seemed to say.

"So Michael," I thought, "you have partly broken your dream oath already, you can scarcely claim to-night to have played for the highest purposes of good. You are going to be a thief."

"M'sieur le Marquis, will you permit me to see you home now, for I have to go to bed?"

"Yes, I'm—I'm—wobbly; show me the nearest way to the Hôtel Grande. Keep the blue Ming bowls, I will come for them in the morning. What's the name of this place?

"Shall I pay for them now?"

"No, no," I said hastily, "the morning will do. Come m'sieur, I will show you the nearest way to the Hôtel Grande."

So, Michael, you became a liar the same night you became a thief, in fact a complete little blackguard, since you never did things by halves. I took him round dozens of winding cobble-paved streets. He would never be able to find the place again.

We lurched and jolted along, for when he lurched, I had to go too, as he was so long and bulky, moreover the pavements were narrow for such walking exercises.

When we reached the hotel he said, "Will you play to me to-morrow?"

"What time, m'sieur?"

"Oh, the middle of the day, when I'm sober."

"Impossible, m'sieur, I shall be upon my way to the Conservatoire."

For the first time I had spoken the truth.

Then I wished the Marquis of Cranleigh good night, merely watching to see that he propelled himself safely through the Hôtel door.

Back I sped to the Rue Notte. I barred the door, and literally flung myself upon the Persian rugs, and felt underneath for the pocket-book. I never expected to find such a sum of money as I found inside.

The bank-notes in hundreds and fifties and ten pound Bank of England notes, amounted to seven thousand, five hundred pounds.

I lost no time. I packed my violin and bow, went upstairs, and slipped the shining white stone into my pocket. I took no clothes, I could buy those. I took the little picture the Painter had given me, it went into another pocket. I hastily looked through my possessions—they were very few. I saw the card, inscribed with her own writing upon the back, of the Duchesse D'Auvergne. I pocketed that; it would be useful, I knew not how, but it would be, I felt sure.

The Painter's little packet of notes I took with me too, I might need every penny in the unknown years to come. I had a little fortune. What of it?—I might need more.

I carefully packed the two powdered blue Ming bowls. They were the most valuable things in the curio-shop, I knew that well enough.

Ah! the shop, shut up, empty; there would be enquiries from the mayor, magistrate, gendarmes.

I wrote out a little card in French. "Closed temporarily until relatives arrive from Scotland."

That would keep Levinski quiet, I thought.

Levinski! why, I was taking away with me the Guadagnini violin, promised to him for his property.

What of it? Be a thorough little blackguard, Michael, while you are about it.

I quietly nailed the card upon the door of the curio-shop, and for all I know it is there to this day.

"Well, you little blackguard?" I asked, for I seemed almost charmed by the new name I had found to describe myself, "where are you going now?"

My new other self replied defiantly, and quite jauntily, and certainly hopefully: "I am off to the railway station en route for Paris, to get a passport for Warsaw."

"Why Warsaw, Michael?"

"Because two of the finest violin teachers in the world are at present Professors in the Conservatoire there."

"Do you believe in Maliol now, Michael?"

"Yes I do, for he said he would find a way."

* * * *

I had burned my boats with a vengeance.

I laughed, as I lay back in the train speeding fast to Paris, whenever I thought of the card nailed to the fastened door of the curio-shop in the Rue Notte. I laughed whenever I thought of Levinski's face when he should read it. I thought with complacency of the transports of rage he would give vent to when he discovered that he had lost the violin, myself, and the good living he had been looking forward to enjoying, all at one stroke.

My amusement was only transitory. I must put away absolutely everything concerned with the past, and think only of the future.

I was in a very strange position to carry out the ambitious career I had so suddenly resolved upon. I should have to be very cunning. I should have to act a part for a long time, and without any doubt I should have to lie excessively and consistently.

"You have started as a little blackguard, Michael," I argued to myself, "and for some very considerable time you will have to continue as one." I became philosophical as I turned things over in my mind.

As a natural sequence of the big theft I had committed, a number of lies, skilfully prepared and economically unfolded, could not appreciably add much to the enormity of the original sin.

I should have to be very careful to conceal the fact that I, a boy of the age of thirteen, was in possession of such a sum as seven thousand, five hundred pounds, plus fifty pounds the Painter had given me in the packet, before he left.

In securing my ticket I had only used a small note. I had many other small notes in my possession, carefully concealed from any chances I might run of being robbed. The sum these smaller notes represented would be more than sufficient to take me to Warsaw five times over. The big hundred pound notes I knew I should have to change gradually at long distances apart and with caution, to avoid endless questions and inquiries.

In reality I was an orphan without either friends or relations.

From this moment I determined to create both friends and relations possessed of a mania for travelling, whose permanent addresses should be as mythical as were their ties of kinship.

I sat thinking deeply, using all my youthful brain-power and cunning to meet the monumental difficulties I saw plainly in front of me.

Through it all, as if a golden thread of fate were slowly running between my fingers, was a certain knowledge that I could wind that thread as I chose, controlling it as I willed.

The difficulty I should have in securing a passport, and being able to leave the country at my age, troubled me greatly. Yet long before the train reached Paris I had solved this problem in so nice a fashion that I chuckled quietly to myself.

A merciful providence in the past had provided me with Madame La Duchesse D'Auvergne's card. Inscribed upon it was an intimate little message written upon the back in her own handwriting giving me free access to the mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain. I would apply for my passport as a son of one of the Duchesse's servants, about to be sent to Warsaw to live with relatives and be educated.

No unnecessary questions or delays now, I thought to myself, triumphantly.

There was only one place I knew in all Paris, where I could stay. I made my way to the Café de Beaux Arts.

Questions at once began. Where was my grand'mère? I replied ambiguously, "Resting"—"at least," I added, "I hoped so." I was alone? Quite, but intended to return in a day or so.

Was I not proud, enquired the patron of the Café de Beaux Arts, to be entrusted with business alone, at my age.

"No," I replied. "The circumstances render it necessary it should be so."

Did I not feel conspicuous? I rejoined fervently, I hoped not.

Would I like him to accompany me wherever I went?

I hastily declined the invitation, telling him it would be both unnecessary and impossible.

So far I had only spoken what might be accepted as the truth.

The Duchesse's card proved to be a veritable talisman, taken in conjunction with the fact that I knew all about her movements, how the Duchesse was upon a voyage in her yacht, after marrying my friend and patron the Painter.

I met with nothing but extraordinary courtesy and kindness, my passport was signed, and sealed, and given to me, together with the Duchesse's card. It was many years before I found out the secret of my considerate treatment, and the real reason of the expeditious manner in which my passport was made out for me.

I then laughed heartily. The explanation was simple, but one which certainly never occurred to me at the time.

A high official, through whose hands my application passed, had asked to see me. He was most kind and courteous during my interview with him. It appears he had instantly recognized me as the original of the famous painting of "Ishmael". He immediately jumped to the erroneous conclusion that I was an illegitimate child of the man who had married his relative the Duchesse D'Auvergne, and that both of them had seized a unique and opportune moment to have me removed to a distant country during their honeymoon.

Verily the Gods themselves, assisted by fools, continued to play into my hands. The tale I told the worthy high official must have further strengthened his preposterous supposition with regard to my parentage.

The Duchesse D'Auvergne was still a young woman, and had no married servants in her employment at all. Thus even a lie that might have been my undoing, only resulted in benefiting me.

At last I paid my small bill at the Café de Beaux Arts and was ready to start for Warsaw. The endless questions of the wretched old patron nearly drove me frantic. He found me marking out a pocket-folding-map I had purchased.

Where was I going? he asked, and he peered over my shoulder and read out what I had marked. "Paris, Cologne, Magdebourg, Prague, Vienna, Posen, Warsaw? Why, what journey is this that you are setting out upon?"

I was instantly cautious. "You are reading out a return journey," I remarked calmly. "I go only as far as Cologne."

"Only as far as Cologne? It is an enormous journey; are you met there?"

"Oh yes."

"By whom?"

"I meet a personage called Maliol from time to time," I said maliciously.

"M'sieur Maliol, I don't know him. Is he a curio-merchant?"

"He deals in unusual things."

"For instance."

"Oh, one of these days I will show you a sample." I smiled gaily as I continued to extemporise. "It is upon business connected with him that I take this violin with me."

"I wondered why you had it, for I know you do not play."

"Quite so, you know I do not play?"

"Assuredly, have you not stayed here before?"

The man in addition to being a nuisance, was a dolt, without any imagination.

"I consider your grand'mère is mad to let you go upon these great journeys all by yourself. Besides, you must carry a great deal of money on you, travelling like this," he ended suspiciously.

"Oh no, only just sufficient to take me from place to place, when I am met."

"Then you go back home?"

"Truly m'sieur, I shall soon be home."

"Well," he grumbled, "all I know is I wouldn't trust you if you were my boy."

"M'sieur," I replied guilelessly, "lacking you as a parent and protector, means that I have to make my living by myself. I bid you adieu and go about my business forthwith."

"Will you stay here on your return from Cologne?"

"I shall do whatever I am instructed to do."

"Ah! I see, you will tell nothing."

"Assuredly m'sieur, everything; I am at your disposal if I can answer any questions that will make you easier in your mind."

"I do not think it right that you should be journeying about all over the Continent. You are a singular-looking boy, you might be run away with, murdered for your money."

"M'sieur, with regard to the first of your objections, what possible use could I be to anyone even should they be so ridiculously inclined? The solution of the second objection is that I have no money."

"Does this merchant Maliol supply all the money then?"

"He appears to have done so up to now."

"Ah, then, he means to make use of you for some reason of his own. I say to you take care, beware of this merchant Maliol, remember my last words to you. Bon voyage."

I seized my violin case with a sense of overwhelming relief and bolted.

The old dodderer viewed my departure with looks of misgiving and muttered to himself. I did not attempt to gather the drift of his remarks. I had heard enough of them to last me for the rest of my life. "Silly old man," I thought, "with your endless questions and remarks you think so clever, you are stupid and insistent enough to have been in the police force."

I was in the train. I had started upon my way. I had told the old man at the Café de Beaux Arts I was going home. I was right, my journey's end would be my home for many years to come.

"Will you be advanced enough for the Conservatoire to take you, Michael?"

"I don't know, I think so."

"Why?"

"Levinski said I had done wonders in two years."

"You cheated Levinski, Michael."

"Yes!"

"You stole to make your ambition possible."

"Yes!"

"And you would do it again twenty times over, you little blackguard, wouldn't you?"

"Yes!"

"Are you going to work, Michael?"

"Yes, like the devil."

"Why Michael?"

"To become the greatest violinist of the age."

"Why *the* greatest, Michael?"

"That or nothing."

"What if you fail, Michael?"

"I shall *not* fail."

"Then your future is in your own hands. You have your chance now, take it."

I have taken it.

* * * *

So many thoughts had been racing through my mind, whilst new scenes and lands, that to me were strange, flashed past the carriage window where I sat, that I had not troubled to notice any of my fellow travellers, apart from being aware that the carriage in which I travelled was uncomfortably crowded.

When we arrived at Cologne the carriage emptied itself of passengers in my compartment, save three people. Myself, a fat personage in the opposite far corner with the appearance of a Russian Jew, who alternately dozed and continually snored, and opposite and immediately facing me, a dark, neatly-dressed man of about thirty years of age. His was a rather saturnine face, yet by no means unpleasant to look at.

He had remained silent and immovable during the journey. His inscrutability betokened character and strength rather than any other quality. A great many people would, doubtless, have found his aspect cold, hard, and perhaps, even repellant. I found myself wondering who and what he could be.

I awoke to the fact that I was exceedingly hungry and thirsty, for in the whirl of excitement of setting off upon my journey, I had neglected to provide myself with anything to eat or drink.

During a long stoppage at Cologne, plates of food of every sort and description, fruit and bottles of wine, were wheeled round on little trucks. The vendors even shouted out the respective merits of their papier mâché trays of food, to tempt passengers who did not intend to alight.

I dived into the pockets of my outer coat, where I had deposited the change after purchasing my ticket, and bought food, and for the first time in my life, a bottle of white wine. As I did so I noticed a sort of glint in the eyes of the silent man opposite, accompanied by a slight twitch of his mouth, which was immediately afterwards repressed into its accustomed hard line.

He silently and steadily looked at what I had purchased. I noticed he bought nothing, I also noticed he had

not anything with him, unless a travelling box beside him, which did not appear to open at all, could be thought in any way a receptacle for food.

One of those happy thoughts which sometimes occur to one at the right moment in life, struck me, so before the train started I purchased another plate of food, a quantity of fruit, and second bottle of wine.

This second lavish outlay, or rather intake, upon my part, for the empty seat beside me was now filled with things to eat and drink, appeared to arouse my opposite neighbour from his stoic calm. As the train commenced to move off I heard him murmur to himself in English, "Great God, extraordinary".

I laughed. "It would be extraordinary," I said, "if I had intended it all for myself, but I thought, perhaps, you would like the second lot."

"So you speak English?" He looked at me long and steadily, but I thought the expression of his face lost a great deal of its hardness.

"Obviously." I pushed the plate of food and bottle of wine towards him.

"Thank you!" he said.

He did not mention that he was hungry, did not once acknowledge that he was thirsty, but the fact of his being both was pretty evident.

I was in a like condition, and the occasion not seeming to be appropriate for displaying any false modesty, I tucked away at the food with a good will and drank some of the wine, to wash it down.

Past the windows, woods and forests, with the blue spaces of gathering twilight patterned between avenues of tree-trunks, slipped away. They fascinated me, seemed to mesmerize me, appeared to be calling me, and so I went to sleep.

It was thus that Maliol appeared to me again during my sleep, as I was rushing towards my destination, which was Warsaw, hastening to some destiny, I knew not what.

* * * *

Once more I beheld the familiar background and surroundings the Painter had made so world-famous in my picture. Again my figure was absent, yet I knew myself to be outside the picture watching it. Even whilst I was contemplating it, the whole landscape underwent a

complete change. Beautiful overhanging trees appeared, where before only burning rocks and scrub had been. Arched spaces, like cathedral aisles of violet-blue, unfolded their mystic caves of wonder, where the interstices of tree-trunks and branches grew high. Beneath them plumes of ferns and bracken nodded their slender graceful fronds, and patches of blue delight, sprinkled with tender yellow faces, which were bluebells and nestling primroses, patterned a jewelled carpet of surpassing beauty.

The great black panther, moving so softly that his padded feet scarcely seemed to disturb or crush the flowers, crept into sight, the herald of his master, Maliol.

The eyes of the great animal were topaz-yellow and luminous, but they held only the brimming tenderness like unto the eyes of some big faithful dog.

Then Maliol appeared and he seemed to say to me, as he always did, yet without speaking, "Michael you shall see the elves, you shall hear the music of their dance. It is the most wonderful music in the world. You shall hear it, and hearing you shall remember it for ever, although it is forbidden to either hear such music, or remember their dance. Michael, I will remove a seal from your ears, a film curtain from your eyes and brain; none other shall hear what you hear, Michael; I will reveal it to you, watch and listen, all else are forbidden save you."

So a flimsy veil that could not have been less delicate than their gossamer wings, unrolled from my eyes, where amidst powdered starshine I saw the wild dance revels of a hidden sphere. From my ears something melted away so that I could hear the maddening melody which a king elf played upon a set of oaten pipes. A whirling sarabande of pearl and gossamer, touching the outside hundreds in the revolving swaying throng with glow-worm lights, no more alive than the bumble bee, the dragon fly, the grasshopper, and the butterfly, who were all there, but no less alive.

The great black panther watched the wild mad revel with the glowing eyes that had seen it all before. Only a great deep purr upon one low note came from him, like the double bass part to the King Elf's oaten reeded pipes. The black panther never even blinked when a giant piece of thistle-down brushed its eyes and floated amidst the fairy revellers. Gaily they flung it from one to the other, faster and faster, and still more madly they danced. They

were winding and unwinding around themselves as they danced wreaths of eglantine. They shook the bluebells to showers of silvery notes.

Through it all came the droning of a great bee buzzing around, dazed with the delight of it all. Whilst music and dance grew well-nigh unbearable, a brilliant elfin form flung up a piece of great wet green moss, another flung a giant toadstool, which, as it fell, burst amidst the dancing gossamer forms, scattering them like swirling smoke. The dance of the Elves was over.

* * * *

I awoke with a sudden start, not in itself an unusual circumstance when one has just tumbled straight out of one world into another.

The silent man opposite was regarding me curiously. The snoring Jew had alighted at some stopping-place during the journey. The silent one and myself were the only occupants of the carriage.

With feverish haste I unstrapped the flat shabby portmanteau I carried and dived into its contents for manuscript music paper and some pencils. However, roughly I scored it, I knew I must at once put down and commit to paper something tangible of the wondrous melody with its unearthly dance that Maliol had permitted me to hear in my dream. I worked with feverish haste, I had an exalted feeling as if I were inspired. Across my knees, the flat portmanteau was a desk, and I felt that Maliol was the guide now, as he had been in the vision.

That strange manuscript, with its airy groups of pencilled notes and roughly indicated phrases, I still preserve. True, as the years passed it was elaborated, altered, refined away and polished like unto some gem of the goldsmith's art; it was worked upon by Moritz Liebner, one of the greatest violinists of his age, and a superb orchestrater. It was, although I did not know it then, destined to become one of the many things that contributed to make my name. Yet the airy charm of its marvellous melody remains practically unchanged from what I wrote down in that rushing jolting railway-carriage. I must have worked for over three hours, then I sunk my head in my hands and groaned. One of the terrible headaches had seized me, from which I periodically suffered ever since

the blow my grandmother had struck me upon my head. Just then I did not care whether I lived or died.

"You are ill?" my silent companion had spoken at last.

"Yes!"

"Are you in pain?"

"Yes, agony."

"What is it?"

"My head."

The pain was so terrible that I was rocking backwards and forwards, and scarcely knew how to contain myself.

It was my companion who now dived into the box which I had thought did not open. He tore some strips of white linen, probably from a shirt. I was too ill to notice or care. He literally soused the strip of stuff with something he poured out of a bottle, and the odour of Eau de Cologne filled the carriage. He bound it round my head and forced some wine down my throat. A big silver bottle of smelling salts was pushed under my nose. He rolled a bundle of stuff under my head for a pillow, and tended me like a nurse. The acute agony passed after a while.

"Thank you," I said, "you have made me feel better. You seem to have everything one needs badly."

"It has hitherto been my duty to have everything about me people may need in a hurry."

"Why?"

"I have, until now, been a gentleman's valet for years."

"Why not now?"

He seemed to hesitate for some time, there was a long pause; after a while he seemed determined to speak and unburden himself, which I am convinced to this day, he would never have done, had any other person chanced to be present in the railway carriage.

"My master died by his own hand some days ago in Paris. He was heavily in debt, and unfortunately he both drank to excess and gambled. He had long ago mortgaged all his estates and squandered the money. Moneylenders seized any money that became due to him. Before the end he managed to get hold of a large sum of money, which was not his. He had a wild scheme that he could make a fortune buying horses, whether race horses or other horses, he never explained. He must have been intoxicated for days when he returned to Paris. He had lost all his money. He gave me notice, but I refused to leave him, telling him my salary was of no

consequence, although I had not received any money for my services for many months. What he did to end his life, I feel he would have done sooner or later. I do not think any money would have saved him, he was tired of his life, he had lived at too great a pace."

"I tried to help him, but nobody could really help him at all, and it was impossible to save him from drinking and gambling."

"What was his name?" I asked.

"He was the Marquis of Cranleigh, an Englishman."

I felt suddenly as if the floor of the railway carriage had collapsed, the train seemed whirling round and round in circles. A sort of galvanic shock seized me in its grip, leaving me frozen with a numb horror; for some moments I was incapable of all thought, of any form of expression.

"Is your head worse again?"

"Yes! a shock."

"I have talked to you too much, keep quite quiet."

He renewed the Eau de Cologne bandage.

In my waistcoat pocket, deep underneath my two coats, I felt for the hard surface of the shining stone.

It recalled the sailor's words. "Since then the stone had waded through seas of blood." Had the thing started its iniquitous career from the moment it had entered the curio-shop of the Rue Notte, beginning again from the very moment it had come into my possession? Should I fling the evil thing away far out from the carriage window of the rushing train? Was it indeed a thing accursed? My nerves seemed all jangling, anyhow, but my brain was beginning to work again.

"Tell me where you are going to now," I asked my companion. "What are you going to do?"

"I do not know."

"You do not know?"

"That is to say I am going to some relatives who live in Warsaw, I have not seen or heard of them for years, but it is at least a chance. I have no money left after my ticket was paid for, I have no work either, but I must somehow find both."

"You cared for your late master?"

"Yes, strange and wild as he was."

"And you looked after him well and faithfully?"

"Yes until the end, and I did not know what he was

going to do, or I would have prevented him doing that last fearful, desperate act."

"Would you look after someone else, as well as you did the other?"

He looked at me curiously for a long time in silence.

"Who?"

"Myself."

He continued to regard me in complete silence, but he was looking at me almost tenderly, if a face so hard and set would be said to express tenderness.

"I hardly understand," he said at length, "from your appearance you are a rather shabbily dressed little boy, of about fourteen years."

"Thirteen exactly."

He nodded. "Not but what you are not a most remarkable little boy, far and away outside anything I have ever met, and I take it you are a musician?"

He gathered the loose sheets of manuscript paper carefully together and regarded them thoughtfully. They must have been so much Greek to him.

"I am going to be a musician."

"You have started to be that for some time, even at your early age?"

"Yes, years ago."

"And where are you going now?"

"To Warsaw."

"To Warsaw—why?"

"I am going to study at the Conservatoire there, to become a violinist."

"This is music written for the violin, then?" Once again he perused what I could see were to him unknown hieroglyphics.

"Yes!"

Here an inspiration came to me. I fumbled in my pockets and produced my passport. Placed beside it was the card of Madame la Duchesse D'Auvergne. I handed it to him.

"Have you heard of this lady?"

He read the card. "Yes," he said, "she is a beautiful lady and holds one of the highest positions in the social world of Paris. I was present once with my late master, the Marquis of Cranleigh, at her splendid mansion in the Faubourg St. Germain."

"Read the message upon the back?"

"It is in French."

"You do not read or speak French?"

"No!"

I translated. "You see it is an invitation from herself to call and see her at what you call her mansion at the Faubourg St. Germain, whenever I please."

"The Duchess D'Auvergne is your friend?"

"I know her, and her husband, the great painter, is my only friend."

"With such friends as this what do you want with me?"

"I want a servant."

"Yes, *sir*."

That one word sir, had made it possible.

"I pay you."

"Yes, sir."

"You will stay with me and take care of me, and do for me the things I cannot now do for myself."

"I will sir, I will do it faithfully."

"What is your name?"

"Nicolo Cator, sir. My father was English, my mother Italian. My late master always called me Cator."

"I shall always call you Nicolo."

"My name is Michael Caviol."

"Yes sir."

So thus a bargain was struck which was destined to continue through all my life. Like most compacts, it had to be taken largely upon trust from both sides. I had found a faithful servant, nay more, a loyal and faithful friend, the like of whom I might never have met again in the whole world.

All this happened before we reached Posen; the last stop before we arrived at the frontier of Warsaw.

* * * *

Since the very beginning, my wisdom in attaching Nicolo to me as servant and friend, a wisdom far beyond my years, became apparent.

From the examination of passports and customs at the frontier, until the time a few days afterwards when he accompanied me to enter myself at the Conservatoire of music in the rôle of a trusted retainer, placing me there for education upon behalf of an aged relative, who became no less venerated because entirely mythical, I have no idea what I should have done without him.

I must confess that all the thinking and organization

emanated from myself, but Nicolo undoubtedly possessed a masterly talent for successfully carrying out schemes which I originated. His tact was perfect, his patience inexhaustible, his devotion to me unending, but his brain-power to solve problems, to slide round difficult corners, and invent situations together with their solutions to supply the need of the moment, had their limitations.

With such baggage as we possessed I advised we should first attempt to find Nicolo's relatives. They resided, he declared, in the Gasse St. Nicholas.

Upon arrival there, we found that several among a small row of houses in the Gasse St. Nicholas, where they once lived, had been pulled down, preparatory to rebuilding.

We enquired the address to which Nicolo's relatives had removed. Nobody knew, it was generally believed they had gone out of Poland some years previously.

Nicolo appeared staggered that a street possessing his name should only have proved a blank wall, so to speak, and scarcely any of that remaining where once the house had been. Sometimes I permit myself to wonder what Nicolo would have done without me, upon this occasion, without money and without any initiative.

"We will lose no time in finding lodgings," I said, "something comfortable and homely, even if it is simple, sufficiently attractive to be able to remain for a long time, without the necessity or perpetually moving."

"And what sort of price are you to pay, sir."

"When we have found something likely, you ask the price and if I think it is all right, I will blow my nose, blow it in a quite decided way. Observe my nose and my handkerchief."

"Yes, sir, and say you do not like the place or the terms?"

"I shall not blow my nose, I shall stare straight in front of me."

"Yes, sir."

"The money here is in roubles and copecks or some such money; well we must see that the price of rent is translated into either French francs or English pounds."

"Yes sir, and where do you think we ought to start?"

"Anywhere in the city away from these desolate houses which have been pulled down; they cannot help us in any way, except to depress us."

Nicolo actually smiled, that is to say as near as he ever committed himself towards a smile.

He carried the two small portmanteaux, I carried the violin case and the parcel containing the two blue Ming bowls.

We left the Gasse St. Nicholas, turning round by the church at the corner. It looked old and interesting, but neither buildings, a strange city, nor its multitude of new faces and costumes, interested me. My mind was concentrated upon finding a home; and I believed I should find it all the quicker because I had money upon me, and could therefore take chances that many another dare not have risked.

We turned by chance to the Platz Smarkow, with its little broad-roomed cottage houses of one story. The windows upon the ground floor and first floor, hung with long blue-green shutters, fascinated me.

We walked round the Platz or Square, and I made a careful selection. I could not have chosen better; it was destined to be my home for many years.

An individual bustled to the door, and despite the cold, appeared to be perspiring freely in his shirt-sleeves. A bristling moustache like the badger hairs of shaving brushes trained in the direction of his nose, gave him the appearance of a particularly angry cat who was indulging in the unusual practice of smoking a long and very pungent cigar. Spits, splutters, snorts, and a volume of Polish, greeted us.

I shook my head and tried French. He responded with delight and spluttered and was most voluble, but the smell of his cigar made me feel faint.

We were invited in; we were tumbled up the stairs in a sort of breathless rush. By way of impressing him and perhaps also to gain time as well, I tried English.

He absolutely embraced me. "'E was of a transport, 'e love ze Eengleesh, 'e live on zem, with zem, by zem, what you call for years. I speak five language but most of all I love ze Eengleesh which I don't speak, no, yes, so very well."

He embraced me again, whereupon I suggested he might share these attentions with Nicolo.

It was a funny picture; Nicolo looked almost hurt and his countenance hardened into a mask more saturine than usual, the moustache of the gentleman whose favourite

language was English bristled and twitched so violently, it almost conveyed the impression he was about to spring.

"No, no, of a certain no, I greet, I shake ze 'and."

Here Nicolo looking like a particularly æsthetic Christian martyr upon the way to execution, suffered a reluctant hand to be seized. "I Hapologise, but I not embrace 'im—'e look like ze devil, ze evil one, but I embrace you as of my own 'eart, you 'ave ze appearance of an angel, a saint."

"That is misleading," I said, "I am really a little blackguard."

Nicolo Cator coughed. I do not think he considered my remark a good introduction for securing rooms.

The man who spoke five languages seemed to be able to laugh in a sixth tongue. I have never known anything to compare with that laugh. It was like a cat in convulsions, from whose eyes, closed in a sort of ecstasy, two tears rolled down, whilst being enabled to emit a prolonged and moaning whistle, resembling the warning sound of a small train about to enter a large tunnel.

"A blageur—eewh zat is ze droll, you make ze fun of me eewh?"

Nicolo Cator stared at the man in icy but well-bred astonishment. For my part I was very amused. My eyes were taking in the rooms, they were simply but comfortably furnished and spotlessly clean.

"Ze rooms all on zis floor 'ere, ze salon 'ere, ze big bedroom next, ze kitchen before ze smaller next bedroom. I do not have ze 'ole 'ouse for myself alone, my wife she die, oh, ze blessed one she go to 'eaven 'appy, nevaire was there such omlettes made on ze earth, nevaire was there cooked such."

"Yes," I said, "yes, what is the rent of the rooms?"

His eyes narrowed suddenly, he became instantly very shrewdly businesslike.

"Fifty roubles a month—or in ze francs—a 'undred and fifty—or ze Eengleesh money it makes, ze six pounds, verteen and four pence, for ze month."

I took out my handkerchief and blew my nose.

"Which of you take ze rooms, 'oo pay ze money and for 'ow long."

I pointed to Nicolo. His face was a study in the utter triumph of expression over emotion. Nicolo up

to that moment had only my word for it that I possessed any money at all. Nicolo gave me one glance, it had all the desperation of a last appeal for a lost cause.

I nodded.

Nicolo made a supreme effort, and with a calm which I thought perfectly superb, announced:

"I take the rooms for my young master."

"Ah! so you are ze servant of 'im, ze boy is ze master."

"I am his servant, guardian, and protector," announced Nicolo loftily, "on behalf of—on behalf of—ahem, relatives. I shall perform that duty unfalteringly, but I shall require the same respect as due to me that he has. Just now you likened me to the devil—well, a devil may be even more entitled to respect than others."

It was a long speech for Nicolo, and I considered was excellently delivered.

The little, bustling, bombastic man drew himself up, his moustache bristled and twitched, but he understood. I do not think he ever forgave Nicolo that speech, and in all the years to come of our association, I do not believe that they were ever really friends, but I always had the power to keep them from becoming openly antagonistic.

"My name is Pomponard, Babtiste Pomponard," he told me rapidly in French. "I have the little wineshop in the Kiosk Kraldt, but I live here; the downstairs floor is enough for me. Here I have my clavichord that I play."

"You are a musician also?"

"Yes I play the masters, Beethoven, Chopin, Schumann and Liszt.

At this point Pomponard again lapsed into broken English and commenced to shout, "Ah, ze Liszt. I play well, but not like ze man 'oose manager and agent I was for years, ze famous Sebastian Kirchenoff. Famous, no 'e was infamous, 'e treated me vilely. I arranged all 'is engagements, did all 'is concert business, 'e left me in ze lurch. 'I finish wiz you,' I said, 'I finish wiz you, you are a pig, a dog, I spit at you, so on ze floor'."

Nicolo, who had not understood the greater part of the above harangue, viewed the worthy man's action upon the carpet, in a moment of excitement, with an expression of sublime disgust.

Nicolo had only been in the best families.

"Come downstairs," shouted Pomponard immediately,

all of a bustle, "and see my beautiful grand clavichord. I will play to you, you love music, yes, you ought to with your face."

I tilted up the violin case I carried and brought it to his notice for the first time. "I am here in Warsaw to study the violin," I said

"The violin, ah! instrument divine."

He kissed his hands in the air. "You a child, a boy, you play?"

"Yes."

"Ah!"

He was about to embrace me again, I felt convinced, so I nimbly turned to one side, placed the violin upon the table and suggested we should go downstairs to see his grand clavichord, and hear him play.

The man Pomponard was exaggerated, grotesque, laughable, ridiculous in turns, making such faces that I could scarcely refrain from laughing outright, but he played the piano beautifully and was a musician of no mean order.

The way he rolled his eyes and twitched his cat-like moustache, whilst he gave himself to the ecstasies of Chopin, surpassed all description by way of the grotesque; sometimes he grinned in a most odd way during a pause, but I loved his playing.

Nicolo observed Pomponard's antics at the piano with much the same interest he would have exhibited had a performing seal given a musical exhibition upon the accordian. I dared not trust myself to look at either of them or I should have laughed outright.

Pomponard finished his recital at last. It was in every way a remarkable performance. At anyrate it had the curious effect of making us know each other in a way we might not otherwise have effected, during the course of years.

"One day," declared Pomponard, as we took our leave and retired to our set of rooms upstairs, "we will play together, you and I, the most beautiful of the masters' chamber music for violin and piano."

"Yes," I answered, "we will play many days."

In the time to come we did play together, many days and many nights for that matter. Fate had flung me unexpectedly into the house of a man who might be a wine merchant, but was also a musician of rare

intelligence and an accompanist of more than usual accomplishments, and I intended to make the most of the opportunity provided for me.

Upon arriving in the sitting-room Nicolo closed the door mysteriously, and advanced to the table where I had seated myself, and regarded me with more than usual gravity, before choosing his words with care.

"Excuse me sir, for asking you, or seeming in any way doubtful, but I find the strain almost more than I can bear. Have you any money at all?"

I laughed outright.

"So you doubted me, Nicolo, you really thought I had come all the way to Warsaw and taken these rooms intending to live here without any money."

"Well you see, sir, I didn't know, and it is all very remarkable; not but what, sir," added Nicolo by way of an afterthought, "you yourself are very remarkable for a boy, sir, as distinctly remarkable as anything one is ever likely to meet; and then you see, sir, you haven't told me any sort of particulars up to now."

"Sit down, Nicolo, and I will tell you now. First of all, I have the remainder, after paying my expenses, of fifty pounds the Painter gave me."

"Well, sir, that is a fair sum, but——"

"Yes, Nicolo, but it wouldn't last long by itself in Warsaw, would it?"

"No, sir, not with rooms at fifty roubles a month, without food, and pardon me for mentioning it, but it seems to me as if you would very shortly be needing clothes and ahem—all manner of garments."

"When we come to the end of that, what do you suppose is going to happen, Nicolo?"

"Indeed, sir, I cannot imagine, and I am unable to say, not knowing much about the customs of the country, if there are any workhouses or not. However, when the end comes, sir, and it almost seems as if it cannot be indefinitely delayed, I shall be here and stick by you, sir."

I nodded approvingly.

"Well, Nicolo, I have seven thousand, five hundred pounds in English notes as well."

Nicolo gasped.

"That is a fortune, sir, and I should like to warn you at once that it is a most dangerous thing to carry such a

sum about with you; there are such things as banks, you know, sir."

I shook my head decisively. "No, Nicolo, I am not going to put it in any bank, there would be forms to fill, questions would be asked, I am years under age, I might never see any of it again. The bank people might decide to give me doles from it, which would be bad, or keep it until I came of age, which would be worse, it would then be of no use to me, for meanwhile I should have lost the opportunity for which it is intended. No, I keep it."

"On you, sir? To carry about with you? In a strange country? It is madness, sir."

"Not on me, Nicolo, I shall find a place to keep it, but we must dole it out and make it last, for I shall be at the Conservatoire here four years."

"Four years, sir!"

"Yes, I know already that for advanced pupils the course is three years, but by reason of my age, the full course for me will be four years."

"Even that will leave a big sum over, sir."

"I shall need it all to start me, after I leave the Conservatoire more or less finished, until I can make my own living."

"Very true, sir. Am I to remain with you?"

"Yes."

"Always?"

"Yes!"

"I am wonderfully relieved, sir."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, we shan't have to face poverty at all."

"No."

Nicolo fidgeted awhile. "Of course, sir, I haven't heard you, but do you play the violin at all?"

I smiled. "Nicolo," I replied, "you will hear nothing but exercises and scales, chromatics and diatonics played upon the violin for years. I am afraid that after a while you will become sick of the very sound of the violin."

"No, sir, begging your pardon, I am very fond of all stringed instruments. I cannot say I care for pianoforte playing at all, but the violin is my favourite instrument. Did you chance to notice our landlord, Pomponard, whilst he was playing?"

"One could not help doing so."

"Such antics, sir; it was ludicrous."

"Yes."

"Do you ever make faces, sir, when you are playing your violin, or breathe and snort like that?"

I remained silent, a sudden thought had struck me. When Nicolo asked me this question, his face was impassive, a countenance of almost classical calm.

I remembered Pomponard's grimaces by way of contrast, I also recollect violinists who had scraped and dashed wildly at their instruments with unnecessary flourish of arms and bow alike, a sort of frenzied perspiring labour. The thought that struck me was this.

The perfection of form for a violinist's playing should be an absolute calm of face that betrayed no emotion whatsoever, a stillness of body so complete that nothing should move save the curve of the wrist that held the bow, and the fingers that crept subtly upward and downward upon the fingerboard. I would realize that in myself, I resolved, a perfect calm, an absolute stillness; the more difficult the music, the more heightened would be the effect. Intuitively I realized it would be possible, instinctively I understood the work such perfected technique would entail.

Nicolo interrupted my highly profitable train of thought.

"You are very seriously considering something, sir. Have I said anything amiss?"

"No, Nicolo, I am seriously considering our going out to a restaurant to dinner. Mr. Pomponard shall join us; it will be a good beginning."

"Very good, sir, then," Nicolo added consolingly, "we shall be able to eat whilst he talks, for indeed, sir, he talks an awful lot."

"Yes, Nicolo, and I shall have to encourage him to talk quite a lot more at times."

"I think myself, sir, Mr. Pomponard will not ever require a great amount of encouragement to do that."

"Perhaps not, but I must start to learn to speak and write Polish as soon as possible."

"Why, sir?"

"It will be necessary."

Once more we descended to Pomponard. He received my invitation with acclamations of delight. Again I dodged the embraces of this highly excitable individual.

Pomponard knew the best restaurant close at hand, Pomponard knew where they kept the best wine. If Pomponard knew about one thing it was wine. All Warsaw might be constantly deceived about this beverage, but he, Pomponard, "nevaire". "I smack ze lips, I loll it round ze mouth, ah! I taste it now," he declared. "You like ze wine, ze good white wine, ah, little Michael."

"I never touch it," I said.

Nicolo coughed, he doubtless remembered my performance of gradually consuming a whole bottle to myself in the railway carriage. I amended my statement. "I only drink it on rare occasions. I will sip a little to-night, to wish us all good luck."

It was a merry, happy, little dinner of complete friendship, during the whole of which Pomponard ate enormously and talked incessantly.

The pompous little man filled his glass from the remainder of the bottle of wine and solemnly toasted my health and wished me success in my future as a student, adding by way of an afterthought, "and I should zink you would be ze youngest and ze most extraordinaire zey 'ave in ze 'ole Conservatoire."

Finally the worthy man, stroking his moustache fiercely in an upward direction, volunteered to do me a service I saw at once would be of the greatest use to me. He declared he would escort me personally to the Conservatoire in the morning and assist me in making arrangements to enter myself as a pupil.

I jumped at the offer.

"I put on ze best coat of black for it, and a black 'at which is 'igh, I march upon one side of you solemn, ze Cator—'e go ze 'ozzer side 'e is solemn enough of 'isself, you march so between us."

"Yes," I said, "won't it look rather like the advance guard of a funeral?"

"Eusche!" wheezed Pomponard with his prolonged whistling laugh, "you are ze droll, you poke ze fun at me—eusche!"

Suddenly he became serious and asked a question.

"Where do you bank here, from which bank do you draw your money?"

I felt intuitively that Nicolo shivered slightly.

"I do not bank, M'sieur Pomponard," I replied

calmly; "quite sufficient money is sent to Nicolo here for my use, from time to time."

"Good, good," grunted Pomponard, "yet I do not like ze remittances, I suppose zey will nevaire fail?" he questioned shrewdly.

"They will never fail."

I jammed a note into Nicolo's hand under the table. So Nicolo paid the bill, every item of which Pomponard checked off upon his fingers to the last copeck. His addition in roubles was wonderful.

Over the Vistula, upon the way home, the last rays of a great red sun transformed domes and turrets into violet and blue terraces of an unending fairy castle.

Surely it held something enchanted for me.

Before I slept that night in my comfortable little bed, with the white hooped linen hanging at head and foot, with the bright blue quilt covering the blankets, I talked to myself.

"You have started well, Michael."

"Yes."

"Little robber, aren't you?"

"Yes! I'm afraid so."

"You're not even sorry, are you?"

"No, but I'm sorry about the Englishman."

"Perhaps your stealing that money made him kill himself?"

"I hope not."

"The Englishman was your first audience, Michael."

"Yes."

"You made him a poor return."

"Yes."

"You are bitterly sorry for your first dishonest act?"

"Yes, I shall always be sorry all my life."

"What are you going to do about the money, Michael?"

"Find some place that will act as a Bank, to hide it in."

I slept until late into the next morning. I must have been utterly weary after the long journey. I was awakened by the smell of roasting coffee and something very savoury frizzling in a frying pan, coming from the kitchen next to my room.

Nicolo was busy; I viewed the preparations for breakfast contentedly.

"I have been out to buy breakfast," announced Nicolo. "I passed through your room without disturbing you, sir?"

"So you can cook, Nicolo?"

"Yes sir, I may safely say without boasting that I can cook anything."

I learned afterwards that Nicolo was correct in his assertion, in fact he rather under-rated than over-rated his skill in the culinary art.

Whilst breakfast was being cooked I looked out of the open window of my bedroom. Only a blank stone wall of the next house, and a tiny stone-flagged courtyard below which apparently served no purpo e except to house, where the flags had been trimmed around its base, a desolate-looking lime tree. I felt sure the tree gave some justification for its existence during the summer months.

Just underneath the blue-green shutters, upon either side of my window, three chilly-looking sparrows perched in conference upon the iron cover of a water cistern. They flew away as I appeared. I leaned out of the window and lifted off the old iron cover. The cistern had been disused for years; it was quite dry, only red and yellow patches of rust remained inside.

"Breakfast is ready sir," announced Nicolo from the front sitting-room.

The round-topped stove, let into the wall of the room with its brilliant-hued tiles, was alight, a glow came from the two iron doors.

"Where is your breakfast, Nicolo?"

"I have mine in the kitchen, sir."

"Nicolo, you will have all your meals here with me."

"Yes, sir, if you prefer it."

"Do you think I was going to sit down every day and eat alone?"

"Very good, sir."

We sat down to breakfast. Nicolo somewhat shamefacedly produced a stout tin box with an unnecessarily heavy padlock.

I stared at it.

"I ventured to buy this when I purchased breakfast, sir."

"Whatever for?"

"To keep the money in, sir," whispered Nicolo, gazing fearfully round the room as if he expected all the burglars Warsaw might contain, to march in.

I grinned.

"The money will be safer in this," urged Nicolo.

"I have found the bank, Nicolo."

"The bank, sir?"

"Yes, Nicolo."

"But you haven't been outside the house, sir, to-day."

"No, so where do you think it is?"

Nicolo looked solemn and mystified. "I think you are joking, sir."

"No, Nicolo, it is no joke."

"I don't think it is sir, to have a sum of money like that knocking about; I can hardly sleep at night for thinking of it; indeed, sir, it worries me."

"Do you suffer from indigestion?"

"Never, sir. Why?"

"Well, if you don't mind jumping up in the middle of breakfast, I will show you where the bank is situated."

I led him by his coat greatly wondering, and pulled off the top of the old iron cistern. Nicolo took the bearings, so to speak; he noted the cul-de-sac yard, not overlooked from any quarter, the lime tree acting as guardian.

"Only the birds are occasional visitors here, Nicolo."

"It is certainly a very strange place, sir."

"A very safe place, Nicolo."

"You will put all the notes in the cash box first, sir."

"Yes, and keep the box inside this cistern."

We returned to the rapidly cooling breakfast.

"What made you think of it, sir?"

"How do you know where our thoughts come from, Nicolo, do you know?"

"I cannot say I know where yours come from, sir, but I do know you seem to have quite out of the ordinary kind of thoughts."

"In what way, Nicolo?"

"Well sir, if I may so express myself, everything you think or do, is downright unusual for anyone of your age; it's altogether uncommon sir, and ahem! almost uncanny."

I consumed the buttered toast contentedly and drank my coffee.

"I cannot help thinking, sir, if anything should ever happen to me——"

"Do you anticipate that anything is going to happen to you, Nicolo?"

"I hope not sir, but it seems to me if it did, you would never be left."

"But it seems to me I should be left, Nicolo."

"Not you, sir, you would never be really left, you have a sort of way that makes me think that you can take care of yourself about as well as anybody that ever lived."

"That sounds as if I were very selfish, Nicolo."

"No, sir, I don't mean that, you are most unselfish, but you are that determined in a gentle sort of way that I have never known its like. Everybody you meet will always do whatever *you* want them to do for you."

I laughed, for Nicolo seemed to be in such deadly earnest, whilst the expression upon his countenance was one of hopeless perplexity.

"That will be very bad for me, Nicolo."

"I followed you, sir, without question, from the train."

"Yes."

"Pomponard, you only met him for the first time yesterday; already he follows you like a dog."

"Rather more like a great domestic cat, Nicolo, except that no cat ever comes upstairs as he is coming up now."

Pomponard burst into the room; he had all the appearance of a successful undertaker, even down to an absurd white evening tie he wore with a black tail-coat. A top hat of an unknown shape, worn at an indescribable angle, completed his outfit. Two black crêpe bands, one circling the hat and the second round his arm, undoubtedly symbolized grief for the lady who had cooked omelettes so divinely upon earth before her departure for Heaven. Pomponard certainly looked solemnly, if grotesquely, imposing. Nicolo seized the tin cash-box and fled.

Nicolo always found himself greatly embarrassed by the effusiveness of Pomponard's greetings, which invariably became intensified after an absence of any length of time.

Eventually we all set off for the Conservatoire. One thing amazed me in Warsaw; the streets seemed literally packed with people who never appeared to hurry, who were all going nowhere, doing nothing, and moreover somehow conveying the impression that they spend the entire day traversing the length of any one street. I made heroic efforts to keep beside Pomponard. There was only one method of carrying my violin case, and that was by hugging it upright against my chest.

Upon arriving at the Conservatoire, Pomponard talked rapidly and excitedly to various officials for upwards of half an hour, after which I was propelled along, still

hugging my violin case, into a room down a corridor, and the door was shut upon me.

It appeared to me to be half-study, half-class room, books, manuscript music, together with all sorts of printed music, were littered everywhere. A grand pianoforte, two violin stands and another stand for a 'cello, and two uncomfortable-looking chairs, completed the furniture. A bored-looking man with gold-rimmed eyeglasses stared out of a window, and after awhile transferred the stare to myself. He spoke rapidly in Polish, or I presumed it was Polish. I shook my head. I was well aware that most people at all educated, spoke French fluently in Poland. I tried French; it was successful.

Instantly we became on speaking terms. Without any unnecessary explanations, he put several pieces of violin music upon one of the music stands and told me to play them.

With the same bored air he watched me unpacking my violin, tune it, after which I played the pieces through. He drummed with his fingers upon the window-pane. I completed my task and waited for what seemed to me quite a long time.

"You have very much to learn," he said at last. "You are entering as a student?"

"Yes m'sieur."

"Good."

He handed me some printed forms, concerning fees, hours of attendance, classes, classification of instruments. I glanced through them hurriedly before being dismissed. Along corridors, where I could hear every known species of instrument being played, I searched for Pomponard and found him, talking with more men, with more forms to fill up, after which I left the Conservatoire with something like a sigh of relief.

"You start to-morrow," explained Pomponard, upon the way home. "You are entered at the Conservatoire for a year to start with. You will take the money with you to-morrow for the fees of the first term. The people who have sent you have given you sufficient to pay the fees, eh?" he inquired anxiously.

"Yes!"

"I have the money for that," said Nicolo.

"Did you play to the Professor?" inquired Pomponard. "What did he think of it, eh?"

"I think he hated it as much as I did."

"Ah! what did he say?"

"He told me what I already knew, that I had very much to learn."

"Eewhew—" laughed Pomponard, "you are a droll—but my word, you will learn, will you not, eh?"

"Of course, that is what I am here for."

"You will not be disheartened?"

"No!"

"Nevaire?"

"No, I shall learn everything they have to teach me."

Despite my assurance to Pomponard, I was exceedingly disheartened. What sort of reception at the Conservatoire I had imagined to myself, I cannot say, anyway, I felt it to be totally different from the one I received. That cold hard dismissal with the words "you have much to learn" chilled me to the heart.

"You are absurd and fanciful," I argued to myself; "did you actually expect the Professors to stop their work and listen to you, or perhaps you thought the students from all the different classrooms would instantly flock into the room and congratulate you. Bah! Michael, you are a little fool, simply that, and nothing else at all."

A dreadful fit of despair seemed to seize hold of me. "I shall never get up to the standard I ought to attain," I thought bitterly.

I forgot I was only thirteen, I could only picture to myself how much I had to learn, and utter failure in the process of ever learning it all.

Nicolo Cator watched me anxiously and Pomponard fussed and bustled about me incessantly, but neither of them had the power in any way to cheer me up. I was passing through a phase of utter dejection, and I was suffering tortures during this time from perpetual headaches resulting from the blow I had been struck.

Yet daily I passed down Tameka Street and the little castle, and was instructed in the violin in the Ordynatskié Palace, which was the Conservatoire and had once, I learned, belonged to the Rurik Sovereigns of Russia.

I loved the walk beside the Vistula, I roamed in the charming gardens, and when Summer came with its three months June, July, August, of beautiful weather and lovely flowers, by way of change from the ice and snow, I adored Warsaw.

Never less than seven hours daily did I practice my violin in the little salon of the Smarkow Platz.

Another violin Professor, named Daniel Chenstokhov, with a great reputation preceding him, appeared at this time at the Conservatoire.

From his first appearance he took an enormous interest in me. Without doubt, I was his favourite pupil. I absorbed all he taught me as a sponge would absorb water, and there was nothing he could not teach me, save that one curiously magic quality added to me afterwards, which was not to be taught, but I did not at that time appreciate the value or know the real properties of the strange white stone I possessed.

In one year there must have been a wonderful change in my playing. My first enlightenment with regard to the change came about one evening when my bedroom door was open and Nicolo and Pomponard were talking in the little salon, after we had all dined together, and I had gone to bed, which I always did very early, so as to be up fresh and early in the morning for my work.

That night I had not gone to sleep. Through the partly-opened door, the pungent odour of one of Pomponard's strong black cigars penetrated. Pomponard was talking. "He 'ave got on enormous, 'e will be ze wonder kind."

"What's that," enquired the practical Nicolo.

"Oh it mean ze marvel, ze rare child, one lent to us from annozer world."

"He knows all about this world right enough," announced Nicolo Cator.

"'Is playing, 'ave it not become lovely?" asked Pomponard.

Nicolo appeared to consider for awhile before delivering his verdict.

"Yes!" he said, "I would sooner hear him play his feathery staccato, or whatever you call it, scales and exercises, than I would hear others play entire pieces with an accompaniment added."

"When 'e do play," burst forth Pomponard, "I could eat 'im. I do worship every bit of 'im and 'is music, but 'e will 'ave to be watched."

"Watched, why?"

"'E work like ze demon too 'ard, 'e 'ave ze strength and 'e 'ave ze sturdy, wot you say, ze sturdy frame, but

'e work ze dixième and ze douzième hours of ze day. 'Is 'and which creeps so skilful up ze fingerboard is like ze white flower, but zey both get ze waxen look, e must 'ave ze exercise and ze air and ze games, or 'e be done, before 'e go far. I Pomponard zink zere be some zings zat do kill a artiste."

"What sort of things," enquired Nicolo Cator.

Pomponard was evidently holding up a fat stubby hand to check his points. I could hear his fingers crack as he bent them in turn. "Zere is ze 'ealth if zat go, sometime it do come in ze neuritis of ze arms and 'ands, which too long strain bring."

"Well!"

"Zen zere is ze swollen 'ead that spoil all."

"He won't get that!"

"Zen zere is ze drink or ze drugs."

"Well, he doesn't drink or drug, and I don't suppose he ever will."

I was so amazed at this colloquy that I had slipped out of bed and was an amused witness of the scene the other side of the door.

Pomponard held up his first fat finger, adorned with an ornate ring, and shook it in Nicolo's face, to emphasize his last point.

"Last zere is ze most dangerous of ze lot, women."

"Good Lord," said Nicolo, "absurd, he is only fourteen."

"'E is now," snapped Pomponard, "but 'ave you not reckon when 'e grow up, if 'e play as 'e will play zen, 'ave ze face zat 'e 'ave now, ze women will be around 'im as ze painted yellow wasps round ze jar of preserve. Do I not know, 'ave I not seen, Sebastian ze great artist when I know 'im ze women ruin 'im, 'e became a dog, a prig, bah I spit on 'im, I spit."

"No, no don't," hurriedly interrupted Nicolo. "I quite understand."

"Sometimes," proceeded Pomponard, "it is only ze one, ze wrong one you comprehend 'oo do it alone, sometime it is ze many, all ze number of zem 'oo turn ze 'ead of the artist. I do 'ope 'e be kept from ze women as I would 'ope a plant would be kept from ze locusts. Nevaire is ze artist safe, only in ze convent."

"There are nuns there," demurred Nicolo, evidently without any intention of being humorous.

"I mean ze monastery," amended Pomponard. "Surely if I do meet ze woman, or ze women 'oo spoil 'is life I will kill 'er I will kill zem ah—bah!"

"Yes quite so," agreed Nicolo, "but don't get so excited about what is not at all likely to happen."

"It always 'appen," roared Pomponard, "zey always seek ze artist I tell you as zair prey, but I Pomponard will stalk zem, and you Nicolo must stalk zem also."

"Quite so, very good," agreed Nicolo.

It was a strange conversation for a boy to listen to. I was greatly amused, entirely undisturbed, and slipped back to bed and to sleep.

About this time something happened at the Conservatoire that at first filled me with hopeless despair, yet which proved afterwards to be a great stimulus in my work.

A boy arrived at the Conservatoire named Andrev Dring. His arrival from the Conservatoire at Vienna caused something approaching a sensation. He was only fifteen years old, a year older than I was at that time. His playing was phenomenal. His execution was at least five times better than my own. For over a year I had been hitherto the youngest and favoured pupil. I was temporarily lost, I was forgotten, beside the presence of this new wonder, and I felt it keenly. My master Daniel Chenstokhov guessed at my despair.

"Why do you grieve, little Michael?" he asked of me, after a lesson during which I had been unusually listless.

"Andrev Dring is a great executant."

"He is a very fine one, yes."

"I can never get up to him."

"He is a year older than you are."

"I could never catch that up."

"Tell me that in another year's time."

"Why a year's time?"

"You will then play as well as he."

I shook my head.

"Remember my words," he told me gravely, "brilliant as he is as an executant, you are slowly becoming already a sounder all round musician than he is even now. Your master for composition tells me you are exceptional. Again your Professor in harmony and orchestration gives me a sound report of you. I can testify to your reading at sight being musicianly in every way. You are very wrong, Michael, for one day you will have to go out and challenge

the whole world if you wish to succeed as a violin virtuoso; and yet the first one you meet about your own age who is better than you are, makes you lose heart and you are frightened of him. Work, work, and put every ounce of brain you possess into your work, always thinking, as you work, and one day you will beat him. He will no longer appear to tower above you.

"*Tchi to bits mozhè.*" (Is it possible?)

My master nodded and smiled.

"*Kyedi Pan veyèdzyè Michael?*" (When do you start, Michael?)

"*Dzis Pàn, Slukham.*" (To-day sir. I hear and obey.)

If I had worked hard before, I now slaved as one possessed, for I was absorbed by one single thought. I meant to gain the highest award possible at the Conservatoire, the gold medal, yet unless some sort of miracle took place upon my behalf Andrev Dring would undoubtedly obtain it, for at the end of three years we should both compete for it altogether.

I often heard him play with my heart filled with something more than amazement. I watched his stubby brown fingers perform seemingly impossible acrobatics.

One thing I noted with satisfaction; his brown face, with its heavy black eye-brows, sleek black hair and Talmuc-like broad snub nose, betrayed in constantly changing expressions, everything he played, or was about to play.

I remembered my early resolution; to play and never to betray any emotion was the secret.

It was a score to me, but what about the execution?

What anyone can once do, another may be able to surpass, I told myself; be a philosopher Michael, work and wait.

One day upon returning home to the Smarkow Platz from the Conservatoire, I was destined to receive a truly terrible domestic shock, which might have ended my entire career forthwith.

The Samovar of Russian tea was upon the table, thin slices of lemon to take with it, many excellent cakes, for Pomponard had been invited up, and Nicolo was heating with hot water the herbatnitchka for additional use, since it was the custom of Pomponard to consume many quarts upon his own account, whenever he sat down to tea.

Pomponard was beaming, and explained to us both that he had done a hard afternoon's work after he left the wine shop.

"I 'ave planted a new lime tree underneath your window," he said. "I removed ze stone and ze tree it is 'alf way up already, it will flourish and so zat nozzing stood in ze way of it growing up to you, even as you grow up, little Michael. I 'ave taken ze old iron cistern away. I 'ad it wheeled all the way to ze abominable Prague Suburb and sold it for what do you zink, tree 'undred and twenty-five copecks."

I went white with horror.

Nicolo was so startled that he dropped the Herbatnitchka. It was smashed to pieces upon the floor and the scalding water oozed over the coloured rugs. It was the first thing I had ever known him break.

"*Mon Dieu Pomponard, tout est perdu.*"

I rushed to the bedroom and looked wildly out of the open window. The iron cistern had gone, my bank had vanished with all the money—our only hope. The lime tree was there; I cursed the thing.

"What 'ave I done?" demanded Pomponard.

"Pomponard," I said, and my voice was very unsteady, "you have ruined me, you have ruined us."

"In ze name of ze good God, 'ow?"

"Quick!" I exclaimed, "there is not a moment to lose, how long ago did you sell it, can you buy it back?"

"Buy it back, whatever for? I sold ze old thing two hours ago."

"It contained some thousands of pounds in English money; hurry, I will explain as we go." I dived down the steep stairs. I ran, Nicolo followed, with Pomponard frantically gesticulating and looking as if he was about to go mad.

We tumbled into a drojky and drove as if the evil one was after us.

"*Yedz prendi, yedz prendzi,*" I kept urging the stangrèt. Over the bridge of the Vistula we rushed and rocked, towards the horse and cattle market. . . .

"Why?" shouted Pomponard, "oh, why did you not tell me? Could you not 'ave trusted me?"

"Yes, yes, of course," I cried impatiently. "I should have told you one day, it was a fancy."

"Mighty 'Eaven," groaned Pomponard, "a fancy, it was madness. We are lost."

"Not yet," I said, "but we shall be if you cannot buy it back. Offer up to any amount for it."

"No, no, not so, zat would be ze way to lose it, if it can be got back, trust Pomponard."

"Stop here," I suggested, "let us walk the rest of the way, we must not excite suspicion."

We found it, the iron top still upon it, gazing at us blankly among other lots of old iron pipes and waste, in a second-hand store.

"I find," announced Pomponard speaking in Polish, to the storekeeper, "that after all I shall require that old iron cistern."

"Why?" asked the storekeeper.

Pomponard was plausible. "I find it matches one I have had to repair upon the other side of the house."

"There is no other side, the houses all adjoin," replied the dealer.

"I should have said the yard at the back," insisted Pomponard calmly.

"I didn't think the houses in the Smarkow Platz had any yards at the back, I have never noticed any."

I glanced at Nicolo; his eyes resembled someone suffering from brain fever.

"My house is exceptional," demurred Pomponard, who was now romancing recklessly. "I have a nice yard at the back, and some growing lime trees in it."

"Do you expect to buy it back for what I gave for it?"

"Oh, no," replied Pomponard, "a reasonable profit."

"Well, it will be useful to me," said the store-keeper. "I can sell that old iron cistern for a fair sum."

It was maddening; I felt, as I stood there, that I could cheerfully have killed the man.

"You can have it back for four hundred and fifty copecks."

"Four hundred and twenty-five copecks," snapped Pomponard. He was apparently the most unconcerned of any of us at that moment. "You understand, not another copeck; you will have a good profit out of it."

It seemed to me to be an eternity before the dealer made up his mind. "Very good," he said at length, "four-twenty-five copecks."

Pomponard counted out the money. We breathed again. We lifted the iron cistern between us and bore it to the drojky.

We tumbled inside. Our fingers trembled as we all pounced upon the lid and lifted it. The tin box was lying inside, the store dealer had never removed the iron cover. It was a merciful omission upon his part, so far as I was concerned.

Pomponard mopped his brow vigorously with a highly coloured handkerchief, and eventually relieved his overwrought feelings in English, for the double benefit of Nicolo and myself.

"You 'ave give me ze 'eart zumps. Yes, you, Michael, I 'ave ze jumps of ze 'eart. I will not stand zese shocks. To-morrow you both oz you come where I take you to ze bank near ze Castle Platz and I put ze money safely in zere for you. 'Ow much 'ave you in ze also stupid leetle lock-up tin?"

"Something over six thousand pounds, in English money."

Pomponard gasped. "Ah! " he cried, "ze wonder and ze mystery of my life is explain. Zey 'ave no letters evaire, I say to myself; zey go not to a bank, and no one come to zem, yet zey pay ze rent always, and buy ze clothes and ze food, and pay ze fees at ze Conservatoire, and buy ze violin strings and ze music. Truly I did at last zink ze money come from 'Eaven in some way because of Michael. Now I compre'end. Zis money shall be taken care of for you to use for yourself, but you are a rich boy. Where did you get all zis money you 'ave so nearly lost?"

"Oh," I replied carelessly, "I stole it!"

"Ewucch!—Ewucch!" laughed Pomponard, "zat is good—you poke ze fun at me."

"Is he not droll, Nicolo?"

"Yes," agreed Nicolo solemnly, "but sometimes he goes beyond a joke."

I had told the truth, and neither of them for one moment believed me. They merely thought I was joking. Undoubtedly, Nicolo was right. Some things are beyond a joke.

Upon arriving home, Pomponard lamented that the tea was ruined. I consoled him.

"You shall come out to dinner with us instead, Pomponard."

"No, no, to-night you shall both come out and dine with me, to show my gratitude for the recovery of the money. Yet what shall I do with the old iron cistern?"

"Put it back in its old place, Pomponard, where it used to be. I will only use it as a money box now for small things. You see, it is as old a friend to me as you are."

Pomponard looked very hurt. "It is a strange fancy," he declared, "to compare me to an old cistern."

I looked at honest old Pomponard and laughed. "You only resemble one another in one respect; you would each be able to hold about the same quantity of wine."

"Ewucch" screeched Pomponard, "the wicked fun you make of me, yet I love the naughty jokes of you. Are you not, indeed, a little devil."

"Undoubtedly."

"Good; after confession, wine and food. I take you both now to the Miodova Restaurant, for there is no place in all Warsaw where the Yazhonbek is prepared as they do it there."

"Ha, ha!" laughed Pomponard, "you learn Polish quickly, but I puzzle you now; it delights me, you look it up in the dictionary."

"I will guess," I rejoined, "I am much too hungry to look up food in either dictionaries or cookery books; perhaps it is pig."

Pomponard underwent a minor convulsion of merriment.

"No, no. Guess again!"

"Well, it's something I have never eaten, perhaps it is mule?"

"'Ark to 'im," bellowed Pomponard.

"Well, hurry up and tell me, or I shall be unable to eat anything at all."

"It is Hazel-grouse!" announced Pomponard, triumphantly. "Ah! 'ow my wife, who is now an angel, did cook the Yazhonbek as no——"

Nicolo and I waited for no more; we literally flung ourselves upon him, and frog-marched him from the room, and through the town to the "Miodova".

I enjoyed that dinner, solely by reason of avoiding Pomponard's cherished dish. I chose chicken instead.

Nicolo confided to me afterwards that I had been wise, his portion was extremely high, he thought.

* * * *

What I should have done without Nicolo and Pomponard, I cannot think. I owe them both a big debt of gratitude, which I have tried ever since to repay.

Pomponard became the banker, and Nicolo the keeper of the Privy Purse, so to speak, and he was a careful and wonderful custodian in that capacity. Pomponard came to the rescue in all manner of unexpected ways.

I confided to him two dread secrets that were troubling me greatly. I was beginning to feel the first signs of the dreaded neuritis in my hands and arms, from my incessant violin practice, and my head at this time was troubling me so much that I found the greatest difficulty in memorising the long classical concertos and other important pieces. Everything of importance at the Conservatoire had to be memorised.

Blank curtains of darkness and despair would unfold and descend upon my brain; sometimes I was able to remember twenty consecutive bars. I told Pomponard. He listened to me with the expression of one seeing an early Greek tragedy exceptionally well performed.

Late that night he burst into the room where I was playing my violin.

"I have just come," he announced pompously, "from the 'Resource of the Merchants'."

"Is that a wine shop?" I asked innocently.

Pomponard indulged in a fatherly smile. "Not so, Michael; you, who have exhausted every old palace, know every picture and church within and without the city, do not know the Club of Warsaw, the Club of Poland. It is *my Club*," he ended proudly.

"Oh, yes, Pomponard; well, what happened at the 'Resource of the Merchants'?"

"I conferred long and anxiously, first with doctors, then with a few famous musicians, who belong to the Club"

"What about?"

"About you!"

"Had you not any other better thing to talk about?"

"All about you," continued Pomponard gravely. "The result is this. I have entered your name at the peerless

Salle d'Aremo, here in Warsaw, one of the finest gymnasiums and academies of fencing in all Russia."

"What on earth for?" I asked blankly. "Have I to train for a professional fencer and athlete, in addition to becoming a professional violinist? I give it up, I refuse, I haven't the time and—" I said, as I sat down upon the squat sofa couch—"I haven't the strength. I am feeling done up as it is. I—I think this last summer and all the work has done me in."

"Listen!" said Pomponard. "Rest quietly there, and hear the wisdom I have heard from all the great ones, to-night. First of all your master, Chenstokhov."

I became instantly attentive.

"He tells me you now equal your rival, Andrev Dring, but he fears for you; he knows you are becoming exhausted, you work too hard. He greatly fears you may collapse as others have collapsed before you. He warns me in time. The doctors warn me in time, also. The time you will seem to lose, you will gain in this most important next two years, for you will have the added strength and vigour to fight with. The gymnasium is to develop your muscles and your body; it will give you enormous strength in time, continual fencing will strengthen your arms, and what is more important still, will give you a right wrist of *steel*. The wrist of your bow arm, remember. Then there must be baths, yes, the best baths in the world, both vapour and swimming, and the most important of all, the massage. Then the walks in the gardens and parks, to take lots of exercise and fresh air, frequently. I must take you to the island of Saska Kempa, two or three times a week for complete recreation."

"And when," I enquired ironically, "do I find time to work, or are the hours of the day to be especially lengthened on my account?"

"You will work at double the pace this way, Michael."

"I cannot do it, Pomponard."

"You must do it, little Michael, or——"

"Or what?"

"Fail."

"Fail?"

"Yes."

I walked up and down the room gloomily. "I haven't time to memorise all the music, as it is," I said brokenly.

"Ah, I come to that. One or two of them there had

also suffered the same way. They found that long violin pieces played again and again, many times over, and put away for a while untouched, return completely known to the memory and in exact sequence. It is a trick of the brain, but it will always come to pass; put them right away and then return to them. Come, let us try it all, Michael, and I will help. All of your music that has not already a pianoforte accompaniment, I will write. We will play so many hours together."

"Will you every day do the programme I will arrange for you? I know the hours at the Conservatoire, and will fit everything in for you."

"Yes, I suppose so, Pomponard."

"Good, little Michael. Starting at once, eh?"

"Yes, if I have to do it, I suppose it is better to start at once."

They were right, those good friends, who had put their heads together at "The Resource of the Merchants." They had found the resource of health and strength and growth for Michael.

As the golden years slipped past, nobody any longer called me little Michael, except as a term of endearment. I had grown straight and strong and out of all recognition. Yes, they were all of them right in what they said. I developed a wrist of supple steel.

At seventeen, I was among the first of the best swordsmen and fencers at the Salle d'armes d'Aremo, whilst the baths had done well for the rest of my body. The constant walks and river air had blown away all the cobwebs of doubt from my brain. I was the physical and mental master of myself.

There was only one thing wanting now, to make it all complete. The Gold Medal of the Conservatoire.

Only three people beside myself knew I had deliberately hugged a rival to my breast and refused to let him go. Just four of us in all knew the secret, but nobody ever divulged it, then or afterwards. One of the very few things I can look back upon in my life and be grateful for having done.

Andrev Dring had come to me one day, his swarthy face pale, with misery in his dark brooding eyes. "You will get the Gold Medal," he said bitterly, "I am leaving the Conservatoire."

I was astounded. "Why?" I gasped.

"Oh, we haven't all money as you have. There is no more forthcoming for me. I cannot pay the fees any longer for the last year. I hate everything and everybody. Yes, I hate you most of all, for you will gain what I ought to have had, what would have made me for life." There were tears of sullen rage and misery in his eyes.

"Well," he challenged defiantly, "aren't you glad?"

"No!"

"Very sorry, I suppose?" he mocked.

"Yes, so sorry that it is not going to happen."

"What is not going to happen?"

"You are going to stay."

"Indeed!" he sneered, "is a miracle about to take place, or are you going to find the necessary big amount of roubles to keep me for another year?"

"Yes, I am going to find the necessary amount in roubles."

He stared at me long and curiously. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes!"

"What are the conditions attached? I suppose you want something in return?"

"No!"

He looked at me incredulously. "Are you mad; you mean to tell me you will pay that big amount to keep me here, when you know I shall win the Gold Medal?"

"I pay the amount, I fight you fairly for the Gold Medal. I shall do my best to win it."

It was evidently past his understanding, but he told our master, Chenstokhov, for I should never have done so. I had to inform Pomponard and Nicolo, since they were respectively the banker and the keeper of the Privy Purse, and I regret to say they objected strongly; but I was determined and not to be turned in any way from my purpose, so the thing was done.

Andrev Dring called and thanked me, but in his heart he thought I was a fool.

I had been fortunate before most artistes, in fact beyond all, for I had never known poverty, yet none could have known harder work. I even cut down my hours for sleep to the lowest possible amount. The needs of the gymnasium and fencing school were insistent, but the work I devoted to my playing was unending. Pomponard

became fussy about my health again and Nicolo grumbled. I was strong enough now in myself to take no notice of them. I disregarded their advice. I felt it was now or never with me, and I was so determined to secure the Gold Medal that every other thought or consideration was swept out of my mind.

I had told Andrev Dring that I would fight him fairly for the greatest honour we had to gain, and which each of us were striving for with all our might.

Did I fight him fairly?

This written confession, the only one I have ever made, either by writing or by word upon the subject, will show I did not do so, for I became aware, shortly before Award Day, of a strange advantage I possessed over him and over everyone. I used this advantage without regret and without mercy.

There was an old book-shop in one of the little turnings off the Castle Platz, and books always attracted me. One day, turning them over carelessly, the fly-leaf of a thin but ancient volume attracted me. It set forth that it was a work dealing with talismans, charms, and precious stones, together with the legends of their supposed qualities and powers. I purchased the book for a few copecks, wandered in the Jardin de Saxe, and seating myself under the great chestnut trees, commenced to read. Some portions of the book were quaint and a great deal in it purely historical, and not particularly interesting to me until I came upon a paragraph that suddenly arrested my attention.

> "It is generally believed and handed down as a fact, that at least two of the famous Kings of Israel, David and Solomon, wore some talisman stone of wondrous and extraordinary peculiarity and power, enabling, it is recorded, these two Kings to do things seemingly impossible to others, and therefore regarded as miraculous happenings. Nothing is known of the nature or name of the strange jewel by which they set such store. It is believed that King Solomon gave his talisman to the Queen of Sheba, and ever afterwards regretted having done so.
>
> "All Orientals and Easterns invariably wore such talismans threaded round the neck and hanging beneath their garments immediately over the heart,

a superstition that by so doing, they gave unto the wearer his heart's desire."

I walked home in deep thought. Slowly and persistently the phrase repeated itself in my brain. "By so doing they gave the wearer his heart's desire."

All these years I had kept my moon-white stone, which upon occasions looked like an opal, at other times like a topaz, locked away in a box. I went straight up to my bedroom in the Smarkow Platz, took out the stone and, holding it in the hollow of my hand, examined it more closely than I had ever done hitherto. There was a tiny black speck, high up towards one end, upon either side of the stone. Never having looked for such a thing, I had not before noticed them.

So, I said, it has once been suspended round something, although the tiny delicate borings through the stone itself have become clogged and filled with dust. I worked away for some considerable time, using a delicate piece of silver wire. I was rewarded. The piece of wire appeared through the other side of the stone. I fumbled in my waistcoat pocket where I often thrust violin strings wrapped in a piece of oil-skin paper, to re-string my violin in a hurry when one of them happened to break. I selected a double length of the E string, slipped it through the stone, undid my clothes, shirt and vest, and measured the distance it would take encircling my neck, to hang over my heart.

The little knots I spliced would never become untied, the thin string of Italian gut would never break; it had no strain upon it, neither would it wear out.

I re-dressed myself; underneath my clothes next to my skin was hidden the strange necklet with its stranger pendant. Even more remarkable was the Pagan wish I uttered. I solemnly stretched out my arms and asked that I might have the wish of my heart. The wish of my heart was that I might play more wondrously than the young David when he played before Saul, King of Israel.

* * * *

My daily fencing and gymnasium, whilst keeping my body fit, added to many hours of violin playing, left that same tired body at night and ready for long dreamless

sleep until each early morning, when I arose for work.

My dreams, in which Maliol always appeared, had become rarer as time went on, with intervals of years between, yet the strange memory of Maliol did not become fainter or in any way fade; he seemed to me always a real and living being and part of my whole life.

Vividly as he had appeared to me in the past, he came to me one night in a vision about three weeks before the final examinations took place at the Conservatoire.

The familiar background of the Painter's picture was there, as it had always appeared in my dream. The great black panther curled beside his master, Maliol, seemed to raise his head and speak.

A subtle but sudden change came over scrub and rocks, desert sand and tangled thorn-growth alike.

What was it causing the jewelled mosaic effect, growing brighter and brighter, hovering like myriad multi-coloured flames.?

I realized it was hundreds of lovely butterflies whose painted wings held every colour the earth has ever known.

Their wings opened and closed, while a delicious melody I could only just hear, played upon them, and changed every second as the sun rays caught and illumined the iridescent colours upon their wings.

Whilst I gazed they skimmed away fluttering in their hesitating flight, lovely patches of purple and scarlet, clad like Emperors and Kings, with others in liveries of lemon and marigold following them as courtiers.

Last of all one only remained to skim the ground, one single butterfly with wings of Adonis-blue. Alone of all the rest it was the end of the melody before it was lost in the deeper blue of the sky.

Nothing remained but the bass drone of a great striped bumble bee, and the far deeper note of the black panther, purring.

Maliol seemed to speak to me, and his thoughts, which he made me understand without utterance, were these:

"If you forget so easily what can become of faith, if you hope without believing, how will you remember to keep your oath."

I seemed to shudder with a sudden foreboding.

"First I sent you the white stone . . . " Then the means——"

"I added the power."

For the first time Maliol approached me and touched the white stone that hung around my neck; he also touched the violin string from which it was suspended. A terrible thrill seemed to go through and through me. I think the final pang which marks the parting between the state of life and death must be some such thing as I then felt encompass me about.

"Realize your power and believe in it always, or nothing evermore can serve you."

"Remember your oath."

I awoke, my forehead was moist and damp with perspiration.

My whole body was shaking; was it with fear or only some hitherto not experienced joy? Through all, the strangely beautiful melody of the butterflies seemed surging in my head.

At intervals all through that day and many days to follow, I tried to capture the nature of the spirit music upon paper. I added an accompaniment of pianissimo arpeggios for the pianoforte.

That accompaniment might well have been the despair of many a pianist, but Pomponard tackled it. He breathed, he grunted, he sighed, and finally wept in a feverish state of ecstasy and delight.

I called the piece of music "Papillions," and won the first prize for it for composition at the Conservatoire. The examination was held for this two weeks before the gradual weeding out took place for the final competition for the Gold Medal, awarded to the best violin soloist. That was the coveted distinction I alone cared in any way about, or sought to gain.

As the time drew nearer and nearer for the great ordeal I am afraid I must have been well-nigh unbearable at home.

Hourly I alternated between feverish doubt and despair, or sublime consciousness of triumph, both as unreal and unsatisfactory as each other.

Pomponard perpetually screeched that I needed more baths and massage.

Nicolo insisted that I required more food and drink.

The very thought of food or drink sickened me.

"I do ransack ze cellars of my wine shop," lamented Pomponard, "I do find 'im some of ze dry wine, ze sweet

wine, of ze white, yellow, and of ze red, and 'e not so much as sip it. I feenish, I feenish, I gets ze damned upset of it, my 'eart goes ze bump, bump. Zere is ze wine." Pomponard therewith banged three bottles down upon the table and disappeared downstairs, dear worthy fellow that he was, loudly protesting that "'e 'ad feenished and that not annozer cobweb would he dust off a bottle if I didn't try to drink some."

Next day something happened that seemed to intoxicate me more than any wine could have done. I was with my master Daniel Chenstokhov in his private room at the Conservatoire. He was about to give me my last lesson before I competed for the Gold Medal. I remember he talked to me most kindly and encouragingly.

"Only five remain to compete for it, Michael, after the final weeding out.

"I think myself the coveted honour will rest between Andrev Dring and yourself. You know of course who the famous man is, visiting the Conservatoire to be the absolute judge."

"No."

"Moritz Leibner, the great violinist who retired, and now only takes a rare pupil every now and then. Yes he was the greatest violinist in the world of his time, a superb musician; his early retirement always remains to this day a mystery to me. He taught me years ago, as an especial favour, all the greatest things I ever learned."

"You, Master?"

"Yes me, he is a very great man and as good as he is great. His decision will indeed be final and without question. Whichever way it goes Michael, I feel proud of you. I, perhaps, more than anybody, know how hard you have worked."

"Little Michael," he continued wistfully, (I was seventeen years old and far taller than himself, but the term "little" came from the remembrances of the past, from a long association).

—— "Little Michael, hard work alone, alas, will not always do it, it is said, but it is true. Some other indefinable thing has to be added. Shall we call it genius? Well, perhaps that is as good a term as any to describe an indescribable thing. Many fail, Michael, who lack that added touch. I failed through that, Michael."

"Master, you?"

"Only after a certain point, I had great executive gifts. I worked, I became a finished musician and teacher, but I do not deceive myself that I had genius."

"Then master, there can indeed be no hope for any of us."

He smiled. "Little Michael, I am forty-eight years old, you are but seventeen, and there is no-one who either knows or can say what may be given to you or what taken away from you."

I played to my beloved master for about half an hour. It was to be my last lesson with him, for lessons had really ceased for me now in the accepted meaning of the word, it was rather playing before super-criticism.

When I ended at length and stood waiting with my violin under my arm, my bow dangling down as I carelessly held it in my right hand, he advanced a few steps towards me. I noticed his face was very pale, he looked at me for a long while without speaking. When he spoke at last, his voice was unsteady, he appeared to be in doubt how to choose his words.

"What has happened?"

"Happened?" I echoed blankly.

"I have never known—have never heard you play like this before."

"Master I have played before you daily."

"Oh, Michael!" he said brokenly, and two tears brimmed into his eyes, and rolled down his cheeks, so that he turned away from me. "What I have longed for, hoped for, almost prayed for, has come to pass like unto a miracle. Michael, the something I spoke of has been added to you. Boy go home and thank your God."

Underneath my vest the white stone seemed to glow and grow warm against my flesh.

* * * *

How the others managed to get through the ordeal of playing before Moritz Liebner upon Award Day, I do not know. I know I suffered tortures.

Three played before me, I played fourth, Dring fifth. The test for myself was to play two movements from the Brahms Concerto, followed by one movement of the Beethoven and the Cadenza.

Moritz Liebner, I heard afterwards, never took his eyes

off me from when I played the first bar, until I had finished.

The examiners bent their heads together over the table; I could not hear their whispers, but it all irritated me strangely.

I left the examination hall, I wandered about, I was plunged in eternal oceans of blackness, the waters of despair seemed to have closed round about me; they were swirling me off my feet and away I knew not where, and cared even less.

It seemed hours afterwards when Daniel Chenstokhov found me staring vacantly at nothing.

He led me gently by the arm to a notice board. I read absent-mindedly.

"Medaille D'Or. Michael Caviol.

"Second Diploma, Andrev Dring."

"It isn't true!" I said, "there is some mistake!"

"It is true, Michael. Oh! Michael, my dear pupil, it has never been known before, for you have won the Gold Medal for violin playing in addition to the first Award for Composition. And Michael, that is not all. I sat beside Moritz Liebner; he said it was superb; super violin playing he called it; he is so struck with you, he has offered to take you back with him when he returns to his home in the Austrian Tyrol, if you will go, and personally train you for a further period of one year, for nothing,

"Michael! think what it means, a chance like that. He says you are too young to go out yet, but after you have matured for another year under him——"

"Yes—yes—what?"

"He says you will be the greatest violinist playing in the world to-day. Michael, God has showered many great things upon you for your possessing, but nothing greater than this."

I didn't speak one word, I listened dazed. Chenstokhov gently endeavoured to bring me back to earth.

"Your good friend Pomponard is giving a dinner to-night in your honour. No, I know you haven't heard anything about it, he didn't tell you, and you were not in a state to listen to him if he had. Moritz Liebner is to be present.

"Moritz Liebner!"

"Yes! and myself, you, Pomponard, your other friend Nicolo somebody. It is a special dinner of honour at the

'European', there is to be a grand piano in the room after the dinner is over. You have to bring your own prize composition and any other work you have composed. The great Liebner himself will accompany you. He desires to hear what other works you have composed. It is all arranged for seven o'clock—go home and dress, boy, and for goodness' sake look as if you were coming to a feast and not to a burial. Wake up, Michael!" He shook me playfully.

"The golden cup of youth, of life, of art, is in your hand filled to the rim. Don't drink it all at once, and God bless you, and keep for you all the power and beauty, the purity and the dignity. I think myself it is going to be a remarkable dinner and an even more wonderful evening. Don't forget your violin, don't forget to dress and play your best—au revoir!"

Of all the feasts and dinners I have ever been present at, no dinner ever came up to the one we had that night. It was an unforgettable memory.

Everything seemed glorious, from the rosy flush upon the flower-decked table, to Pomponard's red face above his frilled and crumpled evening shirt.

For a long time Nicolo declined to come to the dinner, unless he waited at table. Eventually Pomponard assisted my efforts in reducing him to order and obedience. He looked, as a guest, as well-dressed and as stately as Moritz Liebner himself.

I dared to do no more than sip the wine, I knew I had to play afterwards; perhaps I drank half a glass.

Andrev Dring was invited. He had scowled at me, looked as if he hated me, as indeed he did, and refused. He was forgotten, mine was the triumph, I was the one remembered. All the glory of that night was mine and the reflection of the wonderful ones gathered around me, doing their best to spoil me whilst they metaphorically fixed the garlands round my head, and flung the roses at my feet.

Twelve of us sat down in all, for other heads of Conservatoire, as well as three other masters of music there, had been invited. Moritz Liebner sat at the head of the table; I was in the place of honour at his right hand.

With his wit and charm, united to his world-wide experience, he kept us all continually amused, from the moment he declared that the whole arrangement of the dinner-table reminded him of an early Italian representa-

tion of "The Last Supper," which he trusted it would not in any way symbolise in the present instance, until he laughingly declared that he had purposely asked that the Head of the Conservatoire might be placed as far away from him as possible at the other end of the table, to prevent their becoming so immensely friendly that the Head might decide upon sending him, Moritz Liebner, the last three concertos he had composed, by return of post, and insist upon his learning them.

"You have then seized an unfair advantage," retorted the Head, "and have taken almost unnatural precautions to prevent my works being performed by the only one capable of doing them justice."

Music was never mentioned again during that well-remembered and happy meal, but after dinner, everyone, as if by common consent, asked Maurice Liebner to play the violin.

"No, no!" he said, "to-night is the night of youth, the beginning of the golden pathway for the feet of those to come; give youth its chance and its hour. Michael Caviol will play to us, I will accompany him."

In a wonderful silence we played my "Papillions", nay, not mine, but Maliol's, as I thought to myself.

How Liebner played those fairly sprayed arpeggios! The execution of them must have been a revelation to Pomponard; he sat staring at Liebner and myself as if he could devour us, even after his quite remarkable performance of eating all through the dinner.

The last blue butterfly had skimmed away. The six pizzicato chords for violin finished the piece.

"Again! again!" cried Liebner rapturously, "play it again, Caviol; it's delicious, it is hardly earthly, woods and flowers and enchantment is here as it was in the primeval world before it became spoiled. Some great animal purrs in the bass clef, what is it?"

"It was a black panther," I said.

He looked at me curiously, "So! a dream, then?"

"Yes it came to me in a dream, Maestro, but a dream very like real life."

"Who shall say where dreams end and reality begins—but stay, what is this?"

He was rapidly turning over my score of "The Forbidden Dance of the Elves"; he studied the score in silence for some time. His bright intelligent face seemed to actually

change before me, it was alight with a strange glow of delight and hope.

"You have something greater here, boy—boy—did you write this?"

"Yes, Maestro!"

"I will paraphrase the accompaniment of this for you, indicate it as it will be played by orchestra."

"Maestro, could I wish for more?"

"The forbidden dance of the Elves," he mused. "Wisely *forbidden*, I think. This music is wonderful but dangerous stuff; it would arouse the passions of a multitude."

"Arouse the passions?"

"Aye, sure enough. Have you ever played it in public?"

"I have never yet played in public in my life, Maestro."

"Play it now!"

I shall never forget the effect the piece produced within that room before an audience of ten persons when we finished playing. They had risen to their feet around the table, some were breathing hard, others were cheering, shouting, bravoing.

Moritz Liebner put his hands upon my shoulders. "It is the music of devils," he said, "played by an angel. My boy, nay, my great young artist, that I am going to polish and finish, I tremble for you when you play that piece before the audiences of Europe."

"Why, Maestro?"

"Oh God! you don't understand, it's almost incredible, but remember my words; yes, yes, everything shall be done for it. I will orchestrate it for you myself, you play it perfectly, but terribly."

"Terribly?"

"Almost the only word I can think of to express anything so utterly strange. Was this a dream too?"

"Yes,"

"Well it will cause others, who hear you play it, to dream, wild dreams of love and passion, and—its performance will release feelings seldom experienced in the Concert Hall, possibly cause scenes and sensations unequalled in our generation."

Whilst the other professors crowded round to inspect the manuscript, Moritz Liebner drew me upon one side.

"Come," he said, "you must play no more to-night. I have been watching you closely; you have eaten a little,

but you have drunk nothing." He filled two glasses with amber wine, pushed one towards me and seated himself beside me at the end of the table.

"I solemnly drink to a great career," he said. "Yes; Michael Caviol, perhaps the most startling thing that has dawned upon the horizon of music since the famous Genoese, Paganini, lived and died. Drink that wine up boy, and here drink some more, this stuff is too good to hurt you, I want to talk to you. Let the others," he waved a hand towards the group at the piano, "talk over the pros and cons of your composition, let them argue and reason and wonder, attempt to explain if they can, or object if they dare. I will talk to you of other things. They consider the cause and effect of your work. I would speak about your effect upon others." "Yes, your effect upon others," he repeated, "people in general, and women in particular."

"Women?"

"Yes! it is likely to be your worst temptation. I know, I know you are young and innocent now, thank Heaven, but your effect upon them will be the cause of every temptation that can be cast around you to enmesh you. Your face—your form—and as if that were not enough, your playing. I know what I speak of, although my hair is snow-white now, it was a woman, and a wonderful woman, that stopped my career as a violinist. You look surprised; you have heard I am a happily married man! So I am. My wife is the sweetest, most lovable and beautiful companior of my life and my home. But it was not my wife I loved so madly when I gave up all solo playing in public.

"She is a Grand Duchess of Russia now, at that time she was a Countess

"The great can love, ah, yes, very passionately, the titled women can often make you love them and will give all their love in return. But they never *marry* out of their own caste. For them the wild brief golden hours to use you to feed their passion, but in the end they will wreck you, and leave you, and lose you without sacrificing their own positions, and untroubled by even a tremor of conscience for the devastation they may have left in the wake of their gratified dreams.

"Remember my warning, Michael; you do not understand it now, you will some day, and may you escape the worst.

"If a good and a great woman comes your way, marry her at once, and be thankful and safe, but be well assured first she is the right woman, for there are not many who are ideal wives and companions for the artiste who is the Ishmael of his kind."

I sat silent. Liebner's words were the same words as those of the Painter long ago; the very words of Pomponard.

Had I not once and for all time been painted as Ishmael?

Why did they all think exactly alike?

The others came gathering round the table. We had more laughter and fun, more toasts to be drunk, more wine, and I even ventured to smoke a cigarette.

When I got into bed that night my head seemed to be going round and round, or was it the room. It might have been a mild sort of intoxication due to great excitement, or more probably the many unaccustomed draughts of wine.

"Michael?" I questioned myself dizzily.

"You have won your heart's desire?"

"Yes."

"Have you won it fairly?"

"No!"

"So you have cheated them all Michael, you are a young blackguard."

"Yes I am afraid so."

* * * *

It was a wonderful afternoon.

Wonderful beyond belief by reason of the utterly unexpected things that happened, unforgettable for the memory of joy it contained, and would always contain for me, whilst my life lasted.

Anton Vollmark, with big horn-rimmed spectacles adjusted over his kindly eyes, had welcomed me warmly in his curio-shop, in the Weissenhaus Strasse, Dresden.

I believe the charming old man really regarded me as being more valuable than any of his priceless possessions, and they must have been worth the ransom of many kings.

I was conducted to the holy of holies, the inner salon, where he had erected the long narrow stained-glass windows containing some of the original Bruges blue.

Vollmark could never be induced to part with these, so they shed their strangely mystic mellowness all around the salon, forming a coloured lattice pathway upon the floor upon which it almost seemed a sacrilege to tread. The effect of light was startling; in filtered multi-coloured rays it illumated, softly and lovingly, statues, bronzes, pictures, jewels, lovely things of malachite, beryl, and chrysoprase.

I gazed around.

"A wonderful storehouse," I said; "it is like some strange temple packed with all the jewels of the merchants, or offerings flung in tribute within the treasure house of a king."

Anton Vollmark smiled.

"Not so wonderful, my friend," he replied, "as the flaming door of life which you have opened so successfully with your magic, to be crowned as you have been with a crown seldom dreamed of, and you are—let me think, what age?"

I laughed.

"Anyway, so young."

"Yes, just over twenty."

"A miracle," he pondered.

"Perhaps, but hard work also."

"Yes, yes of course always that in addition. Still," he added, "much remains unsolved to me, to all others also utterly inexplicable. I was present at your recital at the Gewerbehaus yesterday. I have seen audiences in Dresden very excited, but I have never known them to be quite mad, to forget everything approaching reserve or control, and storm a platform, and refuse to allow an artiste to go, however beloved, until he has played to them nearly a double programme."

I nodded helplessly.

"Besides," continued the old dealer, wiping his spectacles, "what playing! never have I heard the like, it was somehow not quite earthly, it was—it was——"

"What?"

"Devilish; that 'Forbidden Dance of the Elves', that should have been the last piece on your programme, before they stormed the platform in a body, which I considered a dreadful exhibition of manners, was marvellous music, but oh! how wicked."

"Wicked?"

"Yes it was the music of devils masquerading as angels."

"Really Vollmark, what an odd definition!"

"Do the same scenes happen whenever you play? I know it happened at your first appearance in Paris; I read about it, but how about Rome, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Berlin, London?"

"I'm afraid it is always much the same," I had to confess, "worst of all in London."

"I always thought they were so cold in temperament there."

"Did you? Well they half-killed me."

"Half-killed you?"

"Yes mobbed me."

"Always?"

"Unfortunately."

"Can't you stop it?"

"I don't see how I can, short of having a barbed wire entanglement adjusted on the front of the platform, and anyway, flowers and palms and things always look better."

Vollmark chuckled.

Our considerations upon the question of mobbing were interrupted by shouts of childish laughter, and the scampering of little feet over the polished parquet floor,

a great and precious red lacquer screen wobbled perilously, whilst more shouting and hugging and kissing seemed to betoken a warm welcome in the far corner of the salon.

"My grandchildren," explained Vollmark, "Renal and Gabrielle, Renal six, Gabrielle five, both live with me always; they have lost their parents. These little ones, they take liberties, they scatter, scatter, over the floors, they scramble, they sing, and sometimes even shout, but I love them. Yes, they have even been known to break a costly vase, but that is forgiven them."

"They will inevitably live to break another," I suggested with a suspicion of a smile at the old dealer's troubled expression.

"I'm afraid that may even happen," he sighed, "but I hope for the best."

"I have a visitor there behind the screen."

"A visitor?" I enquired.

"Yes it is the tea hour, we always take it in front of the big fireplace I bought from the Chateau D'Aregnion, you so greatly admire. The big screens drawn around shut off customers and clients, should they call."

"Your visitor seems very popular with little Renal and Gabrielle, judging from their reception. Is it a man or a woman?"

"A woman, M'sieur Michael, a very great lady—she is the—but come and join us at tea, I will introduce you. Anton Vollmark led the way, and we leisurely crossed the big salon. We passed through the red lacquer screens which the children had recently romped round so eagerly that they had set them rocking.

I shall never forget the picture revealed by the glow from the burning logs in the great fireplace. Beside the fire was a royal couch, once famous in history. Anne of Austria must often have reclined upon it. Long after her Marie Antoinette and countless other famous Court beauties had doubtless prized it.

The whole history of the thing seemed dimly to be passing through my mind, whilst I realized that a woman, in years a young girl, was reclining upon the couch. A fair childish head was nestling against either arm, half-covered with the sable furs she wore.

A great bunch of violets was fastened at her throat,

the perfume from them just reached me in the warm atmosphere of the screened alcove.

"A most lovely face and a lovely form," I thought. "She must surely be quite as beautiful as any of the world-famous women who have ever graced Vollmark's most cherished couch."

Anton Vollmark had started our introduction. "M'sieur Michael Caviol, permit me to present to you the——"

Gently the children slid down when she rose to greet me; as she did so one little perfectly gloved hand rested for a moment upon the alpaca sleeve of Anton Vollmark's coat.

"There is no need of a formal introduction," she said softly, "I have heard and seen M'sieur Michael Caviol in three of the European Capitals, in fact he almost seems to me to be an old and valued friend."

I bowed and took the other hand she extended to me.

I noticed her eyes were the colour of the violets she wore, and they sparkled like starshine from the purple sky, on what I aways termed a velvet night; or were they like wet pansies?

For the life of me I could not decide what they resembled that I loved most.

I remained curiously silent and continued to hold her hand until Vollmark, with the nearest approach to fidgeting I have ever seen him display, suddenly brought me back to consider the conventions.

What after all was convention—nothing—so I continued to hold her hand.

She graciously permitted it to remain so.

"I have been more than fortunate M'sieur Caviol, in hearing you play in so many different Capitals. I travel a great deal, I may tell you that I am practically a sort of companion to the Grand Duchess Vassili; as you know, she is rather old."

I smiled. "She may be old, M'moiselle, but assuredly she must be very happy."

"Why?"

"She can never be dull."

"Anyway she is one of my greatest friends; Anton Vollmark is another, and now you will be added to the list, will you not?"

"M'moiselle there is nothing in the whole world that I should desire, or even covet more."

"Don't be too sure of that," she said, as we seated ourselves around a perfect old Chippendale table, whilst she poured out tea for us.

"Anton Vollmark possesses something among his treasures that you would sooner have than anything else in the world, even including my poor friendship."

I drank my tea. "Impossible," I said.

Sipping her tea, whilst yet contriving to supply the little Renal and Gabrielle with cake, she continued gaily.

"What real use, for instance, would there be in the friendship of an obscure little individual like myself, for the famous M'sieur Michael Caviol."

How Vollmark kept fidgeting, first with his tea-cup, and then with his feet. What was the matter with him, I wondered.

"Wouldn't the great world you move in laugh to think of your friendship with a poor little dependent, a companion like Marie Zelovska—that, by the way, is my name, for you know we were never properly introduced."

She said this with a shy glance at Vollmark, who seemed to twitch, I thought.

Perhaps Anton Vollmark, with increasing age, was developing some nervous disorder. I even went so far as to feel sorry for him.

I grew bold.

"What do you suppose Anton Vollmark possesses among all his undoubted treasures that I could compare to the honour and the privilege of your friendship?"

Mademoiselle Marie Zelovska laughed a chuckling, delicious little laugh. "Show him, Vollmark!" commanded Mademoiselle Marie.

Somehow she seemed to command everybody. I could see that Vollmark was but a child in her hands. I had a shrewd suspicion I was the same, and yet what ever she did seemed not only natural but necessary.

"Now my pets," urged Vollmark, gently driving the children in front of him, "be darlings, be good, run away and be angels."

The old man disappeared after them, and left us alone. I laughed.

"How does one run away and be an angel?" I asked Marie Zelovska.

"I don't know, but shall we try?"

I had only been drinking tea, moreover a very little quantity of that beverage, yet assuredly I must have been intoxicated, as though the fumes of much rare wine were mounting to my head.

Without hesitation I crossed to where she was standing, with one arm leaning upon the great carved mantelpiece. She had slipped her hat off so that a head of blue-black curls rested upon the slight curve of one ivory jewelled hand.

I suppose everybody goes mad at times, yet happily one always believes oneself to be quite sane. Even as the children had taken into their loving little arms, her exquisite face, violets, furs and all, so I took her into mine.

She didn't move, but just looked up to me with those unfathomable eyes of hers.

"I am going to take you at your word."

I literally poured the words over her upturned face. "I am going to run away with you at once. We may not become angels immediately, but we shall at least be respectable, for we shall be married. You have known me a long time, have you not? Well, I have only just found the joy of knowing you. You will never have to be a companion to anyone any more, only my companion for life, and I shall never want a more perfect one."

She still watched me with her eyes, as if she were waiting, it seemed to me, for something she had watched and waited for through many years. Something she had passionately desired and found at last.

I drew the flushed sparkling face to mine and kissed her again and again.

Then she took my head in her hands and gazed with her eyes looking through and through me, until I felt for the first time in my life I was melting into another being.

Then she kissed me of her own free will. "Michael," she said wistfully, as she held on to the top button of my coat, "either you know an awful lot, in fact too much about women, or you don't know anything at all. Tell me, which is it, Michael?"

"I don't know anything about them at all," I answered truthfully. "I have had no chance of doing so in my life up to now, and I don't want to know anything about any other women. I shall learn all I have to know from you."

"Michael, I like you for that confession."

"Hold me close again, very, very close against you and kiss me, as you did just now.

"Ah! it's no sudden whim of mine. Boy, I have loved you for—well, longer than you would ever think for, and you—what of you Michael, do you love me?

"You seem as if you do Michael, don't quite crush me, kiss me, yes kiss me if you will, but remember your strength."

"Marie, little Marie," I implored, "you will come away with me now."

"No—no, not now."

"Marry me."

"Wait, wait Michael till I see what can be done."

"But I must see you always now, always," I continued.

"I will find a way, Michael."

Anton Vollmark returned so quietly, he found us locked together in one another's arms.

We never heard, we never heeded him.

I do not know to this day what he guessed, or what he thought, but his face was very grave and sad, as he advanced into the alcove behind the screens.

He seemed to avoid looking at us. In his hand he carried an unusually large case composed of old port wine-coloured leather, deeply and richly embossed in old gold.

I crossed over to the table as he laid it down. "Is it a book, or case?" I asked.

"Both," answered Vollmark.

"By Jove! all these hand carved hinges are——"

"Beaten twenty-two carat," interrupted Vollmark, "only dulled with age and kept purposely dull. This case is made from the coverings of the rarest fifteenth century books known to have been in existence. This is the rarest polished port wine tooled leather deeply embossed with fifteenth century design in gold. Fifteen hand-carved hinges of beaten twenty-two carat gold. The centre two, only, lock. Inside it is lined with fifteenth century velvet, with slide of pure gold and rarest mother of pearl."

"Yes, yes," I said impatiently, "very beautiful, but what is the case for?"

"What do you suppose it contains?"

"I haven't an idea."

Vollmark slid down the golden centre lever. "It

contains," he said, "the four finest violins to be now obtained in the world."

I stood and stared at him. Anything more unlike a violin case I had never seen before. Nor had I ever seen a case capable of containing four instruments at the same time, yet of such extraordinary lightness.

Vollmark unfolded the case, and lovingly removed an old-world velvet wrapper. Four violins lay snugly inside the strange case. The varnish upon them gleamed with the polish and finish of rare jewels.

I was about to take them out, when Vollmark stopped me for a moment. "Baron Hahn, the millionaire banker, collected these," he said; "he couldn't play well, in fact it was pathetic, but he searched at least two continents to collect these violins. For tone and perfect preservation, I believe them to be unequalled in the world to-day. The case of course was a fad. He had that specially made. It cost thousands, but it is, as you know, the violins that matter, by reason of their rarity. The case is only an extremely costly setting." He laid his forefinger lovingly and reverently upon the delicate perfling chased around each violin, avoiding to touch the strings.

"The first is a perfect Joseph Guarnerius, an instrument essentially for concertos, or for playing with a big orchestra. It has the instrumental clarity of a bell.

"This is known as the Emperor's Stradivarius, by Antonius Stradivarius, another perfect instrument. See the varnish is the colour of a ripe cherry.

"Here is the best Carlo Bergonzi known. Last, but not least, the only perfect example left in the world of a Gasparo da Salo."

I received each violin in turn and commenced to tune the strings and pizzicato up and down them.

"There are four bows, and they were concealed here see. Two Père Tourtes, a Tubb, and an elder Dodd."

Marie Zelovska crept round the other side of me and joined us.

"Try the violins and see for yourself," urged Anton Vollmark.

I shook my head, I had already played hours that day.

"Play for me," urged Marie, and she placed an arm ever so lightly upon my arm. "I have not heard you for ages, in fact not since yesterday," she said archly, "at the Gewerbehaus."

I regarded her lovingly. I was thinking more about her than the whole four most beautiful violins in the world.

What was the matter with me? The violins hardly interested me; moreover, I was conscious that at any other time such treasures would have made me wild with delight.

I selected a bow, and leisurely applied some resin to it ,which, according to custom, reposed wrapped in its little coat of washleather in my waistcoat pocket.

Marie and Vollmark slipped each into a seat, one upon either side of the fireplace. She seemed to be gazing into the burning logs and yet I could feel as if she was watching me with those eyes of hers, which had sent such thrills through me. I knew I had the power to thrill her now, even if I had not done so before; although this seemed hardly likely when I remembered the kiss she had given me of her own free will.

I selected the Stradivarius to play upon first. I considered the great Antonius should have pride of place, even in such a quartette of genius workers.

Hitherto I had played always to great audiences for the sheer love of the artistry of playing.

This afternoon I was playing to someone I loved; oh, believe me there was a difference, subtle, yet all-powerful.

I must have played for nearly an hour, using each of these perfect instruments in turn, with their golden Italian singing tones.

The Gasparo da Salo violin I loved most of all.

I have ever afterwards believed this instrument to be the last word in perfection and tone as a medium for conveying everything possible in expression and execution. Most of the violins he made are either mutilated or destroyed, or are useless by reason of the lapse of time. This one specimen was perfect.

Something prompted me to end my impromptu recital to my small audience with the "Ave Maria" of Schubert's, or rather a particular arrangement of it, that Moritz Liebner had done specially for me. Perhaps I was prompted to play the lovely thing through the strange association of ideas which had once led me to play the same music to that other audience, even smaller, consisting of one, the night I stole the money. Most likely I remembered that night had been the foundation of my career, the night I had first become a little blackguard, in those now far-off years in Marseilles.

When I had finished playing it, Marie Zelovska looked across to me.

She looked as one might do who had been mesmerized.

I know, when she looked at me like that, I was mesmerized myself.

There were tears in her eyes.

Vollmark was silent, his head sunk in his hands.

"What have I done?" I asked contritely.

"You have let me listen to choirs of hymning angels," said Marie.

She did not trouble to brush away the tears in her eyes.

Melting sapphires shedding some of their own jewelled drops, I thought to myself.

Anton Vollmark appeared to rouse himself from a sort of trance.

"M'sieur Michael," he said, "I thank you from my heart, you have given an old man a rare feast of beauty, perhaps the most beautiful in my life, lived amidst beautiful things, although I make money from them. Assuredly there is no one in the world who has more right to possess that case of rare violins than yourself. I am not urging you to buy them, yet undoubtedly they should be yours."

"Would you not sell me one, Vollmark, for instance this Gasparo da Salo? See," I said to Marie Zelovska, "is not the form of it, the varnish, beautiful? and strange of Gasparo to have let this diamond-shaped piece of ebony into the very centre of the beautiful back."

She nodded.

"Come, Vollmark," I urged, "sell me this Gasparo da Salo."

"Impossible M'sieur Michael, I cannot divide the quartette of instruments. The price is ten thousand pounds in English money."

I put the violins away regretfully and closed the case. "Not for me then," I declared, shaking my head. "I make very big sums of money, but I am, alas, not a millionaire."

"I paid nine thousand five hundred pounds for them myself in the case, under the hammer."

"Monsieur Michael," the old man continued earnestly, "you're the greatest violinist living in the world to-day, and assuredly I declare you should play upon the very

finest instruments it is possible for the world to provide you with."

"I couldn't find such a sum as that," I laughed gaily, "so I must content myself with my own violin I have had ever since I was a boy."

"Is it not a Guadagnini?" asked Marie.

"Yes, but how did you know that?"

She appeared taken aback for the fraction of a second, then she answered easily enough, "I seem to remember having been told by someone."

"You must understand," I explained to them both, "that I have two dragons to fight, and not merely one, like St. George was forced to contend with."

Marie smiled. It sounds very formidable," she said, "who are they?"

"Pomponard, my manager and very old friend whom, I am convinced, begrudges every pound I spend; and then there is my servant and valet, also an old friend, Nicolo."

"And is Nicolo equally stern?" enquired Marie.

"Worse than the other, M'moiselle Marie; they both seem obsessed with the idea that I am inevitably going to end my days in absolute poverty."

"Because you give away such a lot?"

"Partly that, and for all my extravagances generally. They nearly had a fit when I bought St. Freeda's Priory last year, and packed the lovely old place with old furniture, pictures, china, silver and other works of art. I paid eight thousand for the Priory, and Pomponard and Nicolo lectured upon economy for weeks. In fact Pomponard made me quite uncomfortable. He wandered all over the beautiful Priory and prophesied ruin like Isaiah, only clad in a black frock coat, because even Nicolo, an undoubted authority upon fashionable dress, cannct persuade him to wear tails."

Marie chuckled. "Where is St. Freeda's Priory?" she asked.

"In the Cotswold Hills in Gloucestershire, one of the fairest counties of England.

"Pomponard lost all semblance of control over himself and absolutely shouted at me that he wondered I hadn't bought Castle-le-Sands, a huge castle, the grounds of which join mine; it has been to let for years. It was useless for me to suggest really quite humbly that there was a

good deal of difference between eight thousand for a lovely Priory I meant to make my principal home, and sixteen thousand for a huge castle that I shouldn't have loved at all."

"Anyway " suggested Marie Zelovska, quietly, "the temptation to acquire any more adjoining property has been denied you, M'sieur Michael.

"The Grand Duchess Vassilli is buying, has in fact practically bought, Castle-le-Sands in—in—er yes, Gloucestershire.

"We shall both reside in it this coming summer, therefore M'sieur Michael we shall be very near neighbours."

Vollmark was heaping two more logs upon the fire; he dropped them both with a clatter in the grate, then he dropped the tongs after them.

"That is a wonderfully delightful piece of news, M'moiselle Marie."

She looked across at me.

"I told you we should meet again," she said.

Vollmark rose, he appeared to be making a supreme effort to say something.

Marie Zelovska stooped to pick up the tongs and waved them in his face.

"Anton Vollmark," she declared, "we have monopolised M'sieur Michael Caviol's time too long already, now he is not buying to-day, but I am, and I hope to goodness I am not any less welcome on that account."

I rose to take my departure.

I certainly held her hand a very long while.

"Where do you play next?" she asked.

"Paris next week," I replied.

"Yes, then——"

"The following week, Monte Carlo."

"After?"

"The Gewandhaus, Leipsic."

"Yes!" She was waiting for me to speak.

"I have seven concerts in England, two in London, the rest festivals and the big cities."

"Ah I see, we shall meet in Gloucestershire in the summer."

"The summer is a long way off," I observed rather dejectedly.

"The Grand Duchess Vassilli sometimes gambles mildly at Monte Carlo," said Marie archly. "She has a villa at

Nice, you know." Then she pressed my hand and turned away.

Vollmark's parting words to me seemed almost extraordinary I thought, although undoubtedly sincere.

"Good-bye, M'sieur Michael, and God bless you, and I hope on earth he will look after you."

"Why?" I enquired, somewhat astonished.

"Because, M'sieur Michael, under exceptional circumstances in life, I consider you utterly incapable of looking after yourself."

Marie heard, and was laughing as I left the salon.

* * * *

Something new had come into my life, a hitherto unknown emotion, wild, throbbing and compelling, one that I realized would remain with me for ever.

In my folly I had imagined that my life had given me every emotion through music, and every throb to the senses it was possible for me to have.

I was wrong.

I had never known what love meant, the love of a man for a woman. I knew it now.

It possessed me with irresistible force, swirled me whither I knew not in its giant grip, sweeping me off my feet.

"Don't be such a fool, Michael," I vainly urged to myself, "you have only met her once." "I have always known her," I urged stubbornly. Then I added, "I have always wanted her, longed for her, she has promised she will meet me again. She will be my wife."

"She is playing with you, Michael."

"Never with those eyes; that was not acting nor coquetry; she loves me. I read it in her face; she told me things deep down in her eyes I have never been told before."

"Too vivid an imagination, Michael; you are losing yourself in one of your own dream creations."

"Very well," I urged stubbornly, "better to be utterly and for ever lost in such a dream than to wake to reality, if anything in all the wide world can be called 'reality'."

"I know all the glory of art," I reasoned on to myself, "but I know now, that the glory and the intoxication of love must be far greater."

"A very dangerous doctrine, Michael, especially for you, something from within prompted me to reason. Especially perilous for you, considering your oath to Maliol."

Suddenly I stopped all further thought; I seemed to tremble and grow pale.

A sort of dizziness seemed to seize me, almost as if I stood upon a knife-like edge where the abysmal depths of two vast precipices sank out of sight to infinity upon either hand.

Which way should I fall? I was swaying terribly.

I knew for a moment, whatever happened, I was lost.

With a great effort of will I pulled myself back to real life with a jolt.

No, the jolt came from quite another source outside my control.

The great motor car in which we had been speeding so fast for many hours towards Paris, with Pomponard, Nicolo, and my violin case facing me, had suddenly slowed down.

"Zere are zousands of ze people lining ze road for you," exclaimed Pomponard gesticulating wildly; "blessed 'eavens, it is royal."

"For me?" I queried vaguely.

"Why, of course," shouted Pomponard, "'oo else, 'ark at ze shouts, are you ze deaf and ze blind, no, then 'ark 'ark, you are the idol of Paris, it is you they want. Put down ze window and wave. Don't let zem 'ug your 'ands my Michael, zeyw ill 'ug zem off, zey are all mad, ze good souls."

"What a mob!" I said, but I waved to them gaily.

Gendarmes came up, the crowd surged round, somehow they clawed me up the steps of the Hôtel Meurice, through a swaying, seething crowd, where I could hardly breathe.

"Shout somezing to zem," urged Pomponard, who always appeared to be in his element in the capacity of showman, "somezing short, we are late for ze concert already."

I removed my hands from the revolving glass-doors of the hotel entrance, and stretched them out in greeting.

I remembered all these people must have been waiting for hours. It all seemed so strange to think they should have been waiting for me, the once little, unknown,

shabby, unimportant Michael of Paris and Marseilles, now so long ago.

I felt curiously moved with emotion, with a lump in my throat, as I stretched out both my hands in greeting. I looked with a smile that must have been more friendly, at the crowd of upturned faces covering the steps and the wide pavement below me.

I thanked them in French for their welcome to me; told them how I loved to be among them again, in my beloved Paris; told them it was in Paris where I had heard the violin played for the first time in my life.

They cheered me, those people; frantically they waved to me, women threw me kisses in their gay Parisienne fashion. Nicolo saved the end of the speech, if what I said under emotion could be dignified by such a term. He could be seen at this point vainly struggling through the crowd up the steps with my violin case poised high above his head for safety. He seemed more than relieved when I took it from his hands.

"The master has arrived," I told them, "I am the slave and must follow."

The crowd laughed delightedly.

"Perhaps," I ended, "I shall meet some of you later."

"We can't get into the concert," they roared, "the house is packed out already."

"Zat is true," whispered Pomponard, rubbing his hands together. "I could 'ave filled ze great concert 'all seven times overflow."

"Sorry," I shouted, "what can I do?"

"Give more concerts," yelled the crowd.

"Right!" I shouted back.

"Promise," they yelled.

"Yes, I promise; au revoir," and I bolted inside.

"Ze first promise I make to myself after a quick lunch," puffed Pomponard, "is to find ze back way out. I cannot stand all ze full scrum scrunch, it so upset me that I wobble upside, inside."

"Very natural," I answered, as I passed up the stairs to our suite of rooms.

"Un'appy but very good for business," commented Pomponard.

A bright fire was burning in our private sitting-room at the hotel, the air was shrill with the cold nip of late winter.

Lunch was already served, yet I never got beyond the soup upon that occasion.

Nicolo entered bearing a very large parcel, which he was carrying with extraordinary care. "I had particular instructions, Master Michael, not to deliver this to you until you had arrived in Paris. A special messenger arrived with it before we left Dresden, bidding me take particular care of it as it was exceedingly valuable."

"What is it, Nicolo?"

"I have no idea, Master Michael."

"Undo it Nicolo, please, and see what it is."

"More presents," grunted Pomponard gobbling up his soup, "zat's what it is, I smell it. More admirers, soon I suppose you will 'ave to buy annozer 'ouse to store zem all in," continued Pomponard, with the humorous maliciousness he loved to indulge in. "Oh yes, your charming tiny villa at Portofino not big enough for all ze expensive gifts. Ze big flat in Bruzelles still not big enough, ze most costly St. Freeda's Priory packed with treasures already to overflow, still not sufficient to store ze riches of our young Solomon. No, no, ze only zing to do, buy annozer 'ouse for zem."

"What is it, Nicolo?" I asked, for he seemed to be a very long time undoing the seals of the parcel he had placed upon the settee at the far end of the room.

"Well, Master Michael, I hardly know. It is a long shallow leather case of a most beautiful red colour, covered all over with golden-coloured clasps."

"Ha!" chuckled Pomponard, "some Queen 'ave send 'im 'er crown jewels now I suppose, 'cos 'e never wear no jewels ever, a very useful present I do not zinc."

"Master Michael, why, there are four violins inside, enclosed in velvet and mother-of-pearl and gold."

I nearly upset the lunch-table as I bounded across the room.

Upon the settee lay the case of violins I had last seen in Anton Vollmark's curio-salon in Dresden.

A note addressed to me was tucked beneath the tail-piece of the Gasparo da Salo violin.

After gazing wildly at the violins, I tore open the note. It was in Anton Vollmark's spiky writing and I read.

Weissenhaus Strasse,
Dresden.

Dear Monsieur Michael Caviol,

One of your many admirers, who insists upon remaining anonymous, being also a patron of the Arts, hearing that you had played upon and greatly admired these violins, has purchased the unique set and case for you. The donor begs your acceptance of them, deeming you the most fitting person to own them. I have been commanded to send them to you, but must, both now and in the future, refrain, under a strict professional promise, from informing you in any particulars with regard to the name of the giver.

I congratulate you upon a priceless possession, which, contrary to the usual ways of life, has in your case fallen into loving and worthy hands. I can only hope I may live long enough to hear you play upon each of these superb instruments, as you alone can play.

I am keeping a beautiful little Francois Clouet for your inspection, when next you visit Dresden, also a little panel of the Holy Family, by Correggio. I believe you will want them both for St. Freeda's Priory. You won't object to the price I am asking for them.

With all regards,
Yours dutifully,
Anton Vollmark.

I threw down the letter and gazed stupefied at the violins snugly enwrapped in their ribbed purple velvet. The boxes for strings, with their slides of mother-of-pearl and gold, glittered as they lay between the deep-coloured velvet.

I stood and stared at Nicolo, and Nicolo stared at me. I was stupefied at the magnanimity of this unsuspected, undeserved, and princely gift.

Who in the name of wonder could be rich enough, nay mad enough, to throw away ten thousand pounds as a present to someone they had never met.

Anton Vollmark himself? No, certainly not him. He was a charming old man but he was essentially a dealer; no, it could not be Vollmark.

Marie, surely she—no, I laughed at the very thought. Had she not said she was a poor companion. No, it certainly could not have been she who made such a present.

I remembered that Marie Zelovska had worn lovely and costly sables; after all a woman's furs, however valuable, did not run to double figures in thousands.

Experience has since taught me, however, that I was in ignorance upon this subject, as indeed I was to prove myself in many other respects with regard to my knowledge of women, what they wore, and how much it cost.

A bellow of rage came from Pomponard.

"Ze lunch it all get ze chill, it is a good lunch, bah! I wait no more—no."

Pomponard was stuffing himself energetically. The hotel waiters were looking at me in a hurt way, as if I was neglecting them, in addition to the meal they had prepared so carefully for me.

"Come here, Pomponard!" I commanded.

He was puffing across the room most grudgingly, his dinner-napkin tucked all round his dear old fat neck.

"What is all zis beesiness?" he demanded, "zat spoil all ze 'ot cutlets at ze nick of time."

"Never mind about lunch for a minute, Pomponard, you can return to it, but come and look for a moment at the greatest gift I could have had given me in the world."

Pomponard stared at the case, then he gingerly inspected the violins, one by one.

He took out the Guarnerius, which was of pure golden varnish; anxiously he examined it. Pomponard knew what it was. Next the Stradivarius, with its gleaming back like a ripe cherry. The Bergonzi with its deep Venetian red glowing like an autumn nasturtium's petal with a lighted flame behind it. Last, the deep wonderful brown Gasparo da Salo.

"*Mon Dieu*," he murmured, "*magnifique*."

I took the Gasparo da Salo from him gently, selected the finest of the Père Tourte bows, and crossed to the fire to thoroughly warm my hands.

"I was asked ten thousand pounds for them the other day."

"What!" shrieked Pomponard, "What!"

"An unknown benefactor has made me a presentation of them."

"Ha!" snapped Pomponard, "a womans, yes a womans, I smell 'er out 'ave I not 'eld ze danger signal up to your eyes, ze danger signal is 'ere" declared Pomponard, "did I not say you was Solomon; 'oo is zis Queen of Sheba 'oo gives you gifts? She will 'aunt you, beware of 'er 'abits, 'ave nozzing to do wiz 'er."

"I haven't any idea whether it was a woman who bestowed them upon me, or not."

"Zen you don't know ze world," snapped Pomponard, "of course a womans, bah! I smell 'er out, I be on ze guard for 'er."

"How long before the concert, Pomponard?"

Pomponard consulted his watch. "Three quarters of an hour before ze orchestra goes in. Zey play two pieces first, annozer twenty-five minutes, zen you are on. I feenish my lunch quick, long before zen I count ze 'ouse; oh! little Michael, what a 'ouse zis afternoon, what a orchestra to play wiz, one of ze very finest in ze world."

I was examining and testing every string upon the Gasparo da Salo. "Go on examining your treasures," mocked Pomponard, "go without ze good lunch. Ha! arrive 'ungry."

"I shall dine after the concert."

"Arrive all in a shock, 'urry, ze car—whiz whiz all late, you all smothered wiz ze 'orrid nerves, I know."

My hands were thoroughly warm now. I was running up and down the Gasparo da Salo with its perfect lute-like notes.

"I shall play on this violin this afternoon, Pomponard."

Pomponard dropped his knife and fork. His last effort to eat his lunch appeared to be a failure.

"Madness," he groaned, "a strange instrument and you play ze Beethoven 'Concerto', ze 'Lalo Symphonie Espagnole', also ze 'Forbidden Dance of ze Elves', 'Papillions', and 'eaven know what ozzers zey make you play, all on a strange instrument."

"It is not a strange instrument, I played upon it the other day for nearly an hour. Shut up, Pomponard, and listen to it."

"I feenish," whispered Pomponard, using his favourite phrase as a last argument.

I played him the long passage of double-stopping in Glinkà's "Valse Brilliante", with its shower of harmonics at the end.

"Well Pomponard, does it sound a strange instrument!"

"No, no," murmured Pomponard, "it do sound 'eavenly, also the glorious, dear Lord what a lovely instrument. Ze G string a 'cello, ze ozzer strings ze flute or ze lute, so pure I don't know which."

"What do you think of it, Nicolo?" I asked.

"To my untutored ear, Master Michael, it sounds the most beautiful violin I have ever heard you play upon since I have known you, and I have heard you play upon a good many, Master Michael."

Pomponard dived into his great coat and, buttoning it up tightly, shook a fat forefinger at Nicolo.

"I leave 'im to you Nicolo, 'e play about 'ere wiz 'is new toys for a 'alf 'our exact, after zat you frog march 'im to ze car for ze concert; 'e is more 'elpless to look after than six 'elpless babies. Look you, don't no one be late."

No one took any notice of Pomponard, as he marched off.

I was playing the Gasparo da Salo with its hidden tones of fire, and its surging notes of love, whilst Nicolo busied himself in re-packing my own old violin in a second spare case as a standby.

Nicolo had a horror of strings breaking.

I believe his chief joy over my gift consisted solely of the fact that there would be three other violins always to fall back upon in case of accidents.

I played on, lost to all sense of time, oblivious to whether I was late for the concert, knowing only that I was playing upon what I believed to be the finest violin I had ever dreamed of, and, most wonderful thought of all, I was the possessor of it.

The other three were all exquisite, picked and chosen instruments, the greatest examples of their respective makers, yet somehow I seemed to be one with the old, wonderful, black-brown Gasparo da Salo.

It became indivisible from me, a part of my life and playing; and in a still more strange way, it seemed to me then and there as if I had played upon it all my life, that I had never known or needed any other.

In my heart I knew I should never need any other violin, nothing could be more perfect than this one.

Nicolo became as near frantic with impatience as his usual imperturbability would permit.

"Master Michael sir, the concert has actually started;

the orchestra is playing the first piece now; I beg of you to come sir, it will never do for you to be late, and all that packed house waiting for you."

I woke up, so to speak. Nicolo was quite right. I commenced to bustle, I packed the Gasparo da Salo myself.

"I will carry it, Master Michael."

"No, no, Nicolo, it is too precious even for you, I cannot let it go out of my hands."

I packed it and enwrapped it in its glowing port wine-leather case, that was itself like a jewel, and carefully placed the other three precious instruments upon the table covered in their old *vielle rose* velvet wrappings.

"I will reserve the joy of them until to-night."

"Yes Master Michael, yes, but the question is now the time, the car is waiting."

I have often wondered why that one afternoon concert in Paris stands out in my memory before and beyond all the many other concerts where I have played.

Was it because I knew the whole of the Art world of Paris, the aristocracy of a big capital, was there to do me honour? Assuredly not; I had made my debut in Paris. I had played to them all before.

Could it be either the warm glow of the beautiful artistes' room they had given me packed with choice blooms, or the many visiting cards of greeting waiting for me, among them the cards of the Painter and the Duchesse D'Auvergne?

Could the knowledge of their presence give me an added thrill, even though I knew they had never heard me play in public?

I sought in vain for the particular ecstasy that seemed to dominate me and take possession of me.

The scent of myriads of choice flowers struck me with their subtle presence as I entered and crossed the stage. They were heaped all round my feet as for the coming of an Emperor.

A roar of welcome went up, and that, too, might well have been given to an Emperor and, moreover, a conqueror at that.

Had I conquered anything worth conquering? Some portion of a particular sphere of art perhaps, and with it some of its strange magnetism and mesmerism.

Everything seemed mesmerized that afternoon. The lighting, the flowers, the audience, even myself.

Amidst a wonderful hushed silence, so significant that one could actually feel and love it, I played to a superb orchestra.

My violin sang *through* it, charged with all the wistful pleading of Maliol's gift, which was like, as he had foretold, to that of no other player.

I was lifted away and above myself, living only in the expression of perfect music.

I had retired to the artistes' room, at the end of the concert, for a few seconds, after playing the "Forbidden Dance of the Elves," and was conscious that I had left as near a riot behind me as a well-bred audience could indulge in.

With an outrageous din following me even down the steps to my room at the side of the platform, I realized, even in those few seconds breathing space allowed to me, that two other factors, hitherto absent, had added even more than usual to my playing.

I was playing to, and worshipping, pagan-like, an image of love.

I was in love.

Maliol, I verily believe, had made my art, but only God could make Marie.

I was expressing myself, my feelings, for the first time through a violin the gods themselves might have fashioned.

Perhaps they had, when Gasparo da Salo perfected his master instrument.

The concert director came with flying coat-tails, putting all further thought to flight, closely followed by Pomponard in like fashion, although in an even more speechless condition.

"M'sieur Caviol," gasped the concert director, "I beg of you, I appeal to you to stop the multitude, M'sieur, they go mad."

"Perhaps a doctor," I suggested laughingly.

"Mon cher M'sieur Michael, you alone can cure them; hasten, I beg of you."

Once more I gaily hopped up the steps. For a long time they wouldn't even let me play, they just shouted with a prolonged mighty shout, and it was good to hear them, I thought.

In the utter stillness that followed I gave them a

complete contrast from anything I had played to them that afternoon.

It was a little "Berceuse" I had written for violin alone. I had composed it in Italy, and sunshine of Italy lay somewhere hidden in it, but I had scored it, finished it, and perfected it in my beloved St. Freeda's Priory in the Cotswold Hills.

The enchanted Cotswold where I should soon again see Marie; how thrice enchanted would it be then.

What thought was I weaving in as I played, ever so softly, so as to be just heard, the double stopping that rocked the dreams of some bambino's cradle.

Dear, sacred, joy of life, what sweet sudden thought winged its rapture to my heart, whispering to me the rocking of the cradle of dreams might one day be mine, be ours, mine and hers.

I played the "Berceuse" more lovingly, more tenderly than I had ever dreamed it could be given.

It meant suddenly something to me, exotic, apart, unknown.

The colour was flooding to my face; if it foreshadowed anything to me it meant Heaven, and it was the very first time in my life that ever my thoughts had strayed toward this particular portion of Heaven.

Some of the rapture thrilling through me seemed to have caught, held, and oddly affected the huge audience.

Once again as I stepped off the stage they were praying for more, a whit subdued perhaps by reason of the piece, but certainly no less insistent.

A few seconds' breathing and back to real life, and then more renewed comic pleadings from the concert director.

Helplessly he repeated to himself that the audience wouldn't move, had in fact declined to go away at all.

Could I grant him and them the boon of hearing the "Berceuse" just once again.

"Will they be good after this and depart?" I said.

The concert director hoped so.

"I want my tea." I objected.

"M'sieur, a perfect tea is ordered here for you, and for all your friends who will come to see you after the concert is over."

"It ought to be over now, you know," I ventured weakly.

"M'sieur has only his exquisite playing to answer for that charge."

"Indeed M'sieur, I myself consider it divine art."

"Hark to them M'sieur, the great of Paris bellow like bears, and hunger like wolves. I beseech you, once more the 'Berceuse'."

"The 'Berceuse' is really only intended for children," I replied, "and not wild animals at all."

The director laughed delightedly.

Then I added, "at least one child, a dream child as yet."

Somehow as I spoke the words I blushed for the second time that afternoon.

"May that child's dreams be as beautiful, always, as yours M'sieur Michael," said the concert director gravely.

So once more up the steps, and I played the "Berceuse" again, reverently, and with a preciousness, as of something which was pearl pure, beyond possession, and delicate above imagining.

Fully half an hour afterwards, whilst tea was being served to all the friends who had come to meet me in the artists' room, the buzz of conversation was punctuated ever and anon with bursts of applause.

I had finished the concert, I would play no more, but yet the audience refused to leave.

Outside, they told me, my empty car was already packed with flowers and beset by thousands of people waiting to follow me.

"It sounds almost like a funeral," I suggested to the concert director.

"Rather is it a Pan procession in honour of Apollo, M'sieur Michael, yes I think Apollo is the particular one I mean, at anyrate all the ladies appear to think so," he added slyly.

The concert director made way, when two strong hands were placed upon my shoulders, and a well-remembered voice was saying:

"Michael! Michael! oh little Michael! No longer little, but as tall as myself, have all the Gods set their seal upon you at once and have you forgotten me?

"Michael, for years I sought vainly for you but you had disappeared."

The Painter was talking to me, bearded and bronzed, wonderfully dressed, but still the Painter.

I seized both his hands and choked, full of emotion too deep for words; then I seized the Duchesse D'Auvergne

who by some miracle only known to women had not grown older, seemingly, by a day.

Then we three actually hugged one another, and all talked at once, and nobody seemed to want to listen to anything any one of us was saying.

Our eyes were eagerly, suspiciously bright with love and friendship, brimming with the memories of the past.

All the other people waiting around withdrew from us a little. They took tea and cakes the servants were handing to them. Despite their eagerness to see me, they knew I was engaged greeting very old friends, and refrained with a nice delicacy from pressing around to talk to me.

"Michael, oh, dear Michael! it is wonderful, beyond belief, to see you again." The Painter had his arm upon my shoulder, and continued. "No Ishmael now, little Michael, but tall, surpassingly handsome to look upon, more like a young saint than ever, and where, oh! where did your peerless artistry come from?"

"After Warsaw, Moritz Liebner finished me, instructed me with all his wonderful art, and I worked hard."

"That accounts for the technique Michael, yes, quite flawless, but there is *something else added*. Where did that come from, eh, Michael?"

"Ah, that's a secret."

"I think it must be love," urged the Duchesse laughingly. "Michael, I am proud of you. My husband and myself have always loved you, although we had lost you. It was your picture that first set the seal of fame upon his name; but when I met you as a dear little boy, I never quite realized that you would become the greatest artiste of your age."

"The ugly duckling, dear Duchesse."

"Ugly! oh, Michael." Here the Duchesse shook her head in loving reproach. "Far too good-looking to go round the world playing as you do."

"I have Pomponard and Nicolo to guard me."

"More dragons," groaned the Painter. "Dragons always have a fatal attraction for Michael; I feel convinced the whole of his life will be spent with one or even more breathing wrath and fire over him."

"Pomponard answers that description occasionally," I ventured.

"And Nicolo?" enquired the Painter.

"Oh, he rather favours methods of ice."

"Michael, are you in love?" enquired the Duchesse suddenly.

"Yes!" I answered.

"Ah, I knew it."

"How, Duchesse?"

"Well, we were sitting quite near to you in the front row of the stalls, and when you played that divine 'Berceuse', I was watching your face so intently that I saw you——"

"Duchesse, please——" I pleaded.

She was looking straight into my eyes.

"Like that, eh? Who is she, Michael?"

"Someone quite unknown, one of the most beautiful girl-women I have seen in the world, she is a poor companion."

"Where did you meet her?"

"In Anton Vollmark's, in Dresden. She is one of his customers."

The Duchesse laughed. "Really, Michael, a poor companion could scarcely find anything appropriate to her purse in Vollmarks, perhaps the most expensive curio-shop in Europe. How often have you seen her?"

"Once."

"Michael, are you joking?"

"No!"

"Have you proposed to her?"

"Not in so many words, but she is going to meet me in England, and I shall ask her to be my wife."

"She appears to be able to travel about. To whom is she companion?"

"The Grand Duchess Vassilli."

The Duchesse D'Auvergne gave me a quick, startled look, drew her breath in slightly, and waited some seconds before she said: "What is the woman you love, like, Michael? Give me a description of her. Yes, yes," added the Duchesse hastily, "I will discount a lover's praises."

"She has extraordinary coloured violet eyes, they sparkle and shine like stars. She is not tall, but a perfect figure. A wonderful head of almost blue-black curls, wore priceless sables."

"Rather unusual for a poor companion," ventured the Duchesse. "What language does she speak?"

"I have heard her speak too. Her voice is perfect."

"What nationality is she?"

"Russian."

"Ah——"

"Michael," queried the Duchesse, "will you listen to an old friend, without being angry with her for bestowing a piece of advice."

"Yes."

"Your description seemed to exactly apply to someone who, if I am right in my surmise, you will never be able to marry."

"Duchesse! Why?"

"The secret is not mine to divulge, but I think, I fear, indeed I know, the one you love is intended for someone else."

"I will win her, Duchesse."

"Do not set your heart upon her, Michael, in case the powers against you are too strong."

I shivered, the words of the Duchesse had left me with a sudden chilled feeling that seemed to strike at my heart.

"There, there, dear boy, don't take my words too deeply to heart; I may be mistaken, but I greatly fear I am right."

"Duchesse, tell me!" I implored. "What do you know?"

"Nothing," she answered, rather helplessly, I thought. "Nothing, if I only did really know, I might be able to help you."

"In the meantime, Duchesse, I shall always hope."

"Don't make it a matter of life or death."

"Duchesse, it is already a matter of life or death."

"Oh, Michael, don't say that; but perhaps I am wrong. I hope I am."

"Tell me, Duchesse, is she only betrothed to some man, not—not—married?"

"No, not married, but that betrothal will stand if she is the woman I mean."

"Tell me one of her names, Michael?"

"Her first name is Marie."

"Ah, not an unusual name," observed the Duchesse.

Our conversation was interrupted, the waiting people had waited long enough; now they flocked round and would not be denied their chance of meeting and talking to me.

Distinguished, polite, eager, they clustered around and mobbed me. They were lovable, yet they wearied me, and I knew I must show no trace of weariness.

How could they know, I thought to myself, that I had captured a wonderful moment of life, that I longed to be alone, that they were spoiling with their ceaseless chatter an atmosphere of transcendentalism I might never be able to capture again. They talked all at once and all together about my marvellous Press notices.

Dear Heaven! As I if wanted to hear about them.

My thoughts were caught far away to a little dream-cradle rocking in the unknown.

If beauty, and love, and music, existed at all, they were reflected upon two faces hovering over that dream-cradle.

So they chattered on, they had all read the great notices and critiques, but actually they had hardly dared to hope that any artiste could possibly live up to them. I had more than lived up to them, they vociferated, I had surpassed them.

Of course, I had read them?

I had not, but I was non-commital, I answered that Pomponard for some reason or other, made a hobby of collecting them.

Out of the corner of one eye, whilst I laughed and talked, I observed Nicolo make a dive for my violin and bow, which he deemed they were handling improperly, not to say profanely. They turned them over in an awkwardly curious manner, as if they expected some sort of unknown magic to linger over them still.

Nicolo speedily enclosed both in the beautiful case, which in turn immediately became the centre of attraction.

One woman I noticed was curiously beautiful, with brown-black sombre eyes.

She never seemed to take them off my face.

Somehow I could always feel that her eyes were following me, absorbing me, whenever I moved or spoke.

She was of quite slight build, under the average height, perfectly dressed.

About her clung a sort of marked unusual personality. I observed her cross to where the Duchesse D'Auvergne was standing, and make some sort of quick appeal.

The Duchesse shrugged her shoulders ever so slightly and turned away.

It was the concert director who eventually brought her over to me, and introduced her.

"M'sieur Caviol," he said, "may I have the honour to introduce two celebrities to one another; my friend here Madame Rosa Baumer, whose poems you have doubtless read, desires to know you," whereupon he vanished.

We stood aside and conversed.

She fixed her sombre glittering eyes upon me, and her first words were true enough.

"You are tired?"

"Very."

"None of them understood the enormous expenditure of vitality, all the more vital because it is secret and unseen."

"No madame, yet you comprehend it?"

"I am suffering from it myself. The strain of following the man you love, you worship, from Capital to Capital, adoring him, yet unknown to him."

I nodded absently. I had not anything in particular to say and was unable to guess what she was talking about.

"You have driven all of us here half wild with delight this afternoon, but you made me wild for you, mad for you, a year ago. All my poems are written to you, all my thoughts day and night are for you. I have had love offered me and thrown it away with both hands, now I stretch out my hands, two helpless hands, the hands of a woman, and ask for love, plead for it, and will not be denied."

I aroused myself with an effort. Good Lord! she was wearying me worse than all the others put together.

If they had upset my new captured moment, this woman, beautiful but unknown to me, had ruined it.

I never felt quite so uncomfortable in my life.

"Surely you received my letters?"

I shook my head.

"The poems I wrote to you, dedicated to you?"

Again I shook my head helplessly.

"Pomponard," I murmured, "must have had them."

"Ah! I see," she laughed mockingly, "thrown away in the waste paper basket, I suppose, with the Press notices."

"I—I hope not madame, I would not wish to be so ungrateful for anyone's art."

"And love?"

"That is perhaps even more touching and beautiful, but not always within one's power to give."

"When can I see you alone?"

This was awful, I looked hopelessly round, not a soul of all the admiring throng to come to my rescue.

"You see I leave Paris in two days' time."

"I know, I know—do you suppose I have forgotten that. Will you keep any appointment I make. Remember it is something a woman asks you to do; longs for, pleads for."

"I shall expect to have the honour of seeing you again before I leave Paris, madame," but I added a mental reservation that Hope with his garland of wild roses would not be present to grace the meeting.

I waved frantically to Nicolo to take the violin case out to the car.

I literally seized hold of the Painter.

"Get me out of this for Heaven's sake," I implored.

The Painter smiled, but I think he understood. "There is worse to come outside Michael," he laughed warningly, "there are literally hundreds waiting. I can only liken it to a football ground I once saw in England, when everybody appeared to be struggling and kicking everyone else to death on account of some extraordinary prize, some sort of cup as far as I remember."

"Here goes then, let's fight for it," I rejoined. "It is a mercy I have a rag left upon my back," laughed the Duchesse, when we were all seated in the car. "Well Michael dear, such is fame."

"It certainly has its great inconveniences at times," I admitted.

"What was that extraordinary woman saying to you, Michael?"

"Which one, Duchesse?" I enquired innocently.

"True I forgot; there were many extraordinary women present this afternoon, but I mean the poetess Rosa Baumer. What did she talk about?"

I equivocated. "Oh! nothing that mattered very much."

The Duchesse shot a quick glance at me. "She is not in my set; she actually had the audacity to ask me to give her an introduction to you. I never introduce those whom I do not receive."

"Why do you not receive her, Duchesse?"

The Duchesse lightly ticked off three points upon one of her jewelled hands, events which she deemed of importance.

"Once mistress of the Prince de Sorigniac, left him without even a good-bye. Became the mistress of a titled Englishman living in Paris. Left him on account of becoming enamoured of yet another man. Name in this instance unknown, but not unguessed, since her last essay in verse, and she is a fine poetess I admit, was named 'Flowers of Passion', and it was very nearly unfit to read, but it was unfortunately dedicated to no less a person than Michael Caviol."

The Painter laughed heartily.

I remained silent and uncomfortable.

"That is really amusing," chuckled the Painter, "for I can imagine anything and everything in connection with Michael, except passion."

"Rubbish," retorted the Duchesse. "I can imagine if it were once aroused in Michael, it would be even as his playing, emotion transfigured to such a degree that it carried everything before it."

"Then it would be a spiritual flame only," objected the Painter.

"We have the authority of the Bible," answered the Duchesse sweetly, "for assuming that spiritual flames may be either eventually devastating or triumphantly eternal. The Rosa Baumer woman is the sort of creation that, in the words of a certain poet, would inevitably kill the thing she loved. If not in one way, then in another; in all probability the most objectionable way of doing so would appeal to her most."

"How these women love one another," murmured the Painter.

"She is exceedingly rich," retorted the Duchesse, "so she does not need our sympathy. So far as her poems go, I could suggest a more fitting title to them than any that she has thought of. I consider that 'Poisoned Posies' would be singularly appropriate."

"I must read them," I murmured vaguely.

"No Michael, I think you mustn't," advised the Painter with an amused grin.

"Stop!" I cried, "where are we going?"

The car was passing beneath a big stone archway and slowing down in the paved drive of a palatial house.

"Our home, of course," said the Painter.

"But my hotel dinner is ordered."

"Then it will have to be eaten by somebody else," declared the Duchesse, as she prepared to alight. "You dine with us, it is all arranged."

"Do you suppose," exclaimed the Painter, "that after losing you for years and finding you again, we should allow you to return to an hotel and dine alone?"

"But Pomponard! Nicolo!" I objected.

"Oh, dragon number one must dine alone for once, and eat the other dinners in addition; from the look of him I should think the arrangement would suit him admirably."

"Dragon number two, who looks as saturnine as the Devil himself, and who is hugging that exotic-looking violin case in the front seat, which case I am sure has a history, will also dine here."

The Painter led me up the stone steps through great glass doors into a luxurious and perfectly appointed mansion. I received an impression of silver-pink, and apricot lights, shedding a subtle glow and warmth from carved Italian sconces of gold.

"No, you needn't worry about dress, Michael, we are purposely alone, we are not dressing ourselves. Nobody else here except the young Duc de Choiseuil, my wife's cousin; he's about your age, you'll like him. Come with me and you shall have a wash and brush up, a cocktail before dinner old chap, and then a long rest afterwards."

"Yes, I'm tired."

"So I should imagine, after the Beethoven, the 'Symphonie Espagnole', to say nothing of your other contributions to the programme."

Later on as we sipped our cocktails, the Painter confided to me the plans he had made for the evening.

"I am going to positively claw you away from my wife after dinner, and take you to my particular studio den. Yes, it's rather beautiful and I think you will find it restful. We will smoke our cigars, whilst I hear all the mysteries about you, and you know, Michael, there must be a lot of mysterious history concerning you from all accounts. Afterwards," continued the Painter remorselessly, "that is about ten o'clock——"

"I go straight home to bed," I interrupted.

"Oh no, little Michael, you don't, you are going to do

something to please me. I have arranged to-night to delight a good many people in Paris, so you must fulfil all that is expected of you."

"What can reasonably be expected of anybody after ten o'clock at night?"

"I am taking you to a Bohemian gathering."

"I finished with all that years ago," I objected

The Painter laughed. "You may have become a great Philistine, Michael, but you are coming with me to-night."

"I absolutely refuse; I won't go."

"Yes, Michael you will, if only for old times' sake. To-night students of the Conservatoire of music, some of the student painters, and sculptors also from the schools, have assembled. Where do you think Michael? Why at your old haunt the Café de Beaux Arts.

"The patron boldly proclaims your name over the door, and that you have used it since your childhood."

"Good heavens!"

"Yes, it has prospered under your supposed patronage, although it is somewhat altered. Two big rooms have now been knocked into one; it holds about a hundred people.

"At the dinner there to-night none but special students will be admitted.

"As a matter of fact," mumbled the Painter, "I have given the dinner, and promised faithfully as a great treat to them, to actually produce you to play to them."

I groaned.

"Think what it means to them, Michael."

"Yes, I'm thinking, but——"

"Michael, to please me; besides, I've promised. They came to me in flocks, in deputations, to beg for you. They twitched their floppy black ties, wriggled nervous hands in and out the wide brims of their hats, and looked so pathetic, I simply couldn't say 'no'."

"The dinner you are giving them, I suppose, is a compromise, in case I didn't come?"

"Well partly, but that isn't quite all."

The Painter looked so contrite that I could not refrain from laughing.

"You seem to have taken a lot for granted; anyway tell me the worst at once and get it over."

"The students, or rather one or two among them chosen

as spokesmen, are going to ask you to do something rather big for them to-night."

"Umph! Any further enlightenment."

"No, Michael."

"I know only too well from past experiences in Warsaw, that students are capable of anything."

"I will tell you this much, it is no rag, no rowdyism or anything like that. You will play afterwards, if you do play, to a silent room of worshippers. No finer audience in the land. I am anxiously waiting to see what you will do; they will ask you to give something that you needed once badly yourself, long ago, as a child."

"Then I expect I shall give it."

"Yes Michael, I expect you will."

A mellowed chime sounded through the house. "Dinner!" declared the Painter.

As he spoke the Duchesse stood in the doorway, waving a newspaper. She was radiantly gowned.

We both looked at her admiringly.

So far as I was concerned, I regarded her almost reproachfully.

"I dressed," explained the Duchesse, "to make up for you two." The Duchesse tapped the newspaper she held. "Michael, is this true about you?"

"I shouldn't think so, Duchesse, but what is it?"

"A whole column declaring that an anonymous donor has presented Michael Caviol, the famous violinist, with four of the finest violins in the world, enclosed in a case so costly that it could scarcely have avoided notice even in King Solomon's Temple. The total value being so many thousands, that I really had to read it through once or twice to gather the amount."

"Pomponard! oh Pomponard!" I lamented.

"Did he give them to you?"

"No, no, irrepressible, shameless, Press Agent, I only received them this afternoon. He blazons it in all the papers to-night. I haven't even had time to play upon or admire the other three. I was looking forward to doing so to-night."

"So you shall," declared the Painter, as he led me to dinner. "Your second dragon Nicolo shall fetch them here, and you shall play just one piece upon each instrument to the students to-night. They are ready to add themselves to the number of your worshippers already,

Michael, and they will never forget it."

As we entered the dining salon, we met the young Duc de Choiseuil and I was introduced to him.

Young, brilliant, very handsome, and according to rumour, almost too heavily endowed with riches to be consistent with a safe progress through his particular glittering world, he was nevertheless a man.

When I first met him, I was only conscious of his charm and his almost reverential greeting of myself, which, seeing I was some few years younger than himself, amused me immensely.

"Couldn't come to hear you this afternoon, M'sieur Caviol, although I have been absolutely crazy to hear you play again, ever since your recital at the Queen's Hall, London, last year. Driven to it by desperation, do you know what I'm going to do?"

I shook my head, as I finished the last sea-impregnated oyster of my *hors d'œuvre*.

"I'm dressing up as a student, and sneaking in to-night to hear you play. Nobody knows me there."

"Jolly," I declared, "are you going to wear a big black floppy bow, a very out-of-elbows jacket, and shabby trousers?"

"Rather!"

"Won't that be rather an abrupt change for you?" I laughed as I looked across the glowing dinner-table at the immaculately arrayed young aristocrat.

"Shouldn't care if I only went in a dressing-gown made of that beastly sacking stuff, with a cord and sandals, like that chap Saint somebody or other, if only I can hear you play."

"Dear Raoul," commented the Duchesse, "you are in a perpetual state of either penance, or worship, or both. Upon the last occasion I observed you to be in an attitude of worship, almost amounting to a trance, and moreover in public, you were adoring, at the moment, the young Princess Marie Idourska of Russia."

"I shall always adore her," declared the young Duc. "God bless her, always. She is the most beautiful girl in the world. Have you ever met her, Caviol?"

"No!" I answered quite innocently.

The Duchesse looked at me quickly.

"Are you quite sure, Michael?"

"Quite, I have never met her; I wish I had."

"She is the loveliest thing I know," affirmed the Duchesse, "but she isn't for you, my dear Raoul."

"I'm going to try anyway."

"Naturally, and should Michael ever know her, she is not for him either. The Princess Marie is to be bestowed upon a man I dislike more than any man I have ever met. I refer to Prince Paul Idourska of Russia, her cousin, now the head of the ancient house."

"I would sooner see her in her grave than married to that filthy brute," replied the Duc.

"Hear! Hear!" murmured the Painter.

"I would sooner have my title and estates," the young Duc continued, "than those of Prince Paul. After all, they are clean," he added, whilst a flush swept over his face.

Then, suddenly, as if he had been betrayed into too deep an emotion, a ripple so to speak upon the surface of his good breeding, he instantly changed into a gentler and gayer tone.

"As for nous cher Monsieur Michael, one of the idols of Europe," he continued laughingly, regarding me with earnest and most friendly eyes, as I consumed some delicious partridge, "I think he would stand a chance with anyone," he ended generously. "He, too, is clean, and so far as titles go, he is far higher than any of us, for he too, is a prince. A Prince of Art."

I was very happy. I sipped the superb Cliquot and smiled at them across the table.

"It is jolly nice of you all," I said, "but leave me out of the discussion, for even should it be as you say, a Prince of Art ought never to fall in love with a real earthly princess, and one fabulously rich at that, to say nothing of her being a famous beauty."

"So you know that, Michael?" queried the Duchesse.

"Why, of course!"

"I suppose, Michael old chap," enquired the Painter, "you make hundreds and hundreds now, don't you?"

I nodded.

"More?"

"Yes!"

"Thousands, Michael?"

"Yes!"

"And how much do you make, Raoul, you naughty boy,

out of your racehorses and gambling?" enquired the Duchesse.

"I lose thousands," admitted Raoul cheerfully, "but by Jove, I'm going to make thousands over a horse, born, bred, and trained in my own racing stables."

"What is its name?" demanded the Painter. "I beseech you to let me be in the betting, Raoul."

"I'm keeping him dark," whispered the Duc, "but when the time comes, I'll tell you, and if I say *go*, then *go*, all of you, for all you are worth. You also, Caviol."

I smiled and shook my head.

"I don't know anything about racing," I admitted.

"I have heard dear Raoul talk like this before," sighed the Duchesse.

"Often!" groaned the Painter, as he doubtless recollected past losses.

"Yet I see no reason why he shouldn't come romping home first at the post, or rather why his horse shouldn't some day, if only for a change."

"Look here Caviol, if I let you know the horse is safe, practically unbeatable, will you back it for yourself, it may bring luck to me?"

"Certainly!" I said, "perhaps it will bring luck to me as well."

"What a wonderful horse it must be, I must really venture something upon it," declared the Duchesse.

"It's like the soufflé we're eating," pronounced Raoul "light, airy, absolutely unapproachable."

"Then it will be in the soup," sighed the Painter, whilst we all laughed at him.

"My dearest," reproved the Duchesse gaily, "what a mixed metaphor, and we trust impossible, even in a nightmare, for I am sure the result would be horrid."

At the close of dinner the Duchesse rose from the table and smoothed her husband's fast greying locks lovingly with her hand, as she still lingered with us.

The Painter threw his massive head back, looked at her her adoringly, and seemed thoroughly to enjoy the attention.

"Of course you men will have coffee and liqueurs in the studio. Talk your heads off, and afterwards go to a wretched place filled with clouds of tobacco smoke and packed with unwashed Bohemians, many of whom I suspect of not even owning pocket handkerchiefs, so they are compelled to borrow one another's, particularly if

Michael's playing makes them cry, as it always makes me."

"No women admitted," mourned the Duchesse, "so I shall miss hearing Michael again.

"However, I forgive you all if only for the sake of this dear incorrigible Bohemian of mine, who will never mend his ways now, bless him."

Here the Duchesse imprinted a kiss upon the upturned face of the incorrigible one.

"Dine with us to-morrow, Michael, before you leave Paris for Monte Carlo."

"Gladly Duchesse, thank you."

"Au revoir, Saint Michael, look well after the dragons," and she blew me a kiss.

"Ripping," declared the young Duc, as we made our way to the studio, "so you will be at Monte; I'm going there next week, I shall meet you."

"Yes, I'm going to play there."

"So am I," he laughed, "at the tables. I suppose Caviol, you won't by any happy chance be in Venice in a fortnight's time?"

"Pomponard has a date in Venice pencilled in for me, but I do not think I am going."

"Who is Pomponard?"

"A great fat breathing Dragon," grumbled the Painter.

"In other words, my manager," I added.

"Oh well, do go somehow, I'm going there and we can have no end of fun. I'm staying at the old Palazzo del Avarro, got my own gondola, and a carnival will be on during the week."

"What in the name of fortune are you going to Venice for?" demanded the Painter, "no gambling there, no horse racing either."

"I am going because I know the Princess Marie will be there, and I am longing to see her, going to propose to her also going to be refused," lamented the young Duc, "that for a cert, but I'm going to have a shot."

"By the way Caviol——"

"Call him Michael," suggested the Painter. "We all do, we never seem to remember his other name until we see it printed on the bills."

"Well Michael then, I tell you what I'll do, if you are playing in Venice at the time, I will introduce you to the most beautiful girl in the world, to the adored Princess Marie."

Not taking any great interest in the Princess Marie, I assented readily enough, adding that I should be honoured and delighted.

"Michael, lie back in that big armchair and rest," ordered the Painter, "you have over an hour before we start. Try one of these Coronas, you will like them I know. Have a liqueur of brandy."

"No, thanks."

"Nonsense, just to please me; it will give you just the necessary pick-me-up."

I lay back in my comfortable chair in the luxurious studio. Through half-closed eyes I was conscious of the glow, the atmosphere, the superb pictures dimly seen at night, through the filtered light, flung now only upon the little patch where we sat before the big carved fireplace.

They talked, and I listened lazily, and sipped my liqueur brandy, feeling very inclined to doze.

"No, Raoul," the Painter was saying, "You know you don't stand a chance; remember, she is of virtually royal descent, God-child of the Czar; under his protection, she cannot marry whom she pleases."

"Yes—but that unutterable brute——"

"You know the penalty if she refuses, the alternative. Russia is inexorable with regard to the disposal of its high-born women.

"If Russia ever revolts, ever has a revolution, such as we had once here, it will be because of devil rulers like the infamous Prince Paul," cried the Duc excitedly.

"I know, Raoul, but Russia will never have a revolution such as France had."

"He is a swine, and you know it."

"I have heard so, I do not know him."

"Debauchee, bully, and I believe coward."

"Why do you say that, Raoul?"

"For one thing, I knew a youngster he killed in a duel, a young officer in a regiment; he was brave enough in challenging him about a woman's honour. The Prince Paul pretended to be insulted. Yes, he murdered him. When a greater swordsman and more noted shot than himself challenged him, to avenge the youngster's death, Prince Paul excused himself upon the plea of rank.

"I knew Colonel Vascovitch who challenged him. The Colonel's request being refused, he called him a coward

to his face. The prince took that, he was not insulted then, oh dear no."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and then the foul stories about him, some of them doubtless true, that he exercises or has exercised many of his ancient feudal privileges in Russia, upon his vast estates."

"Hearsay, maybe, scandal perhaps, Raoul."

"Well then," retorted Raoul hotly, "his filthy life in Paris, is not that sufficiently disgusting to be known."

"Ah! perhaps."

"A libertine, a swine, and a bully, about as fit to be a Prince as the lowest Apache in the Paris slums.

"To dare to even touch the fairest, purest thing the Creator was placed upon the earth at the present moment. Faugh! it sickens me. I cannot even speak of it, I would sooner the lovely Princess Marie married an artisan, if he were clean and wholesome and good; he would at any rate be worthier to approach her."

"Dangerously socialistic, and exceedingly revolutionary, Raoul!"

"And what better?" demanded Raoul. "One day I tell you, not alone Russia, but the rest of the world will rise, then you will see a revolution the like of which has never been known."

"I hope you are not a prophet, Raoul. Hush, don't wake him—Michael is asleep."

I was not asleep quite, but I did not undeceive them.

"It's a wonderful face," said Raoul, Duc de Choiseuil, softly.

"Yes, very."

"A wonderful life too."

"Yes, one part of it I am very anxious about, I'm going to ask him."

"Why?"

"When I lost sight of him, he was a boy. The old patron of the Café des Beaux Arts only remembered that he went away to join some merchant, or merchant-prince.

"The old chap declared his name was Maliol.

"I have never heard of such a man, or met him. I am anxious to know who he was, where he met Michael, what he had to do with him.

"You see the boy Michael bolted for some reason. I had payed a large sum of money to a man called Levinski,

to train him. The lessons were to have lasted for another year until I came back again."

"And you think?"—queried Raoul.

"Don't know what to think. Where did he get all the money from to go those hundreds of miles away, and get years of training, to keep him in comfort, if not in luxury, as he seems to have been kept?"

"He was poor before?"

"Comparatively."

"However it was," said the young Duc softly, "it is the face of an artiste, a face without a single sin upon it."

"If they only knew," I thought.

I nearly chuckled, instead I yawned, and appeared to wake up gradually.

"Are you rested, Michael?" enquired the Painter.

"Rested and most apologetic."

"Don't mind about that, you had an exhausting afternoon. We start in twenty minutes' time."

"Has Nicolo brought the violins and their case?"

"Yes!"

"You have no idea who sent you that wonderful gift, Michael?"

"Not the faintest idea."

"Michael, when I left you as a little chap, you didn't —I don't know how to put it—you were such a strange kid, you didn't?——"

"Didn't what?"

"Michael, who found all the money for your training all these years?

"Tell me, Michael, who was Maliol?"

"I got the name out of the patron of the Beaux Arts."

I remember rising out of my chair and laughing, as I took another Corona the Painter offered me.

"I believe in reality," I answered, "the money came from such one called Maliol, but I never met him in this world."

"Never met him, Michael?"

"No, not as I meet you."

"Then, who on earth was he?"

"I don't know."

"Michael, what do you mean?"

"I don't know, that is all."

"But the money?"

"Oh, that was *left to me*."

"By whom?"

"Through the instrumentality of Maliol."

"Someone you had never met?"

"Yes."

"Was it much?"

"Some thousands!"

"Thousands?"

"Yes!"

"Who brought the money to you—a lawyer?"

"No, an Englishman, a stranger to me."

"Did he tell you what it was for?"

"No, I only saw him for a very brief time and played to him."

"You played the violin to him?"

"Yes!"

"What was the Englishman's name, Michael?"

"*I did not know*, then, I never asked at the time. I learned he died soon afterwards."

"So it means, Michael, that neither your benefactor nor his emissary are living, and you knew neither of them."

"No, they're not living, and I did not really know either of them."

"Were there any conditions to your strange legacy, Michael?"

"Yes, I had to love art before everything else."

"Is that all?"

"Is that not enough?"

"Yes, yes. I see what you mean, how you must have worked."

"Have I emerged unconvicted from the cross-examination?"

"You have come through glorified, yet unscathed," laughed the young Duc de Choiseuil."

"Michael!" cried the Painter, "believe me I didn't mean to be such a brute as to cross-examine you, but I was puzzled, I am still puzzled, for it is the most extraordinary story I have ever heard, and if anyone else had told me such a one, I should have unhesitatingly refused to believe them.

"You are somehow alone and apart, Michael, things happen to you that could never happen to anyone else. Look at the anonymous gift of the four violins."

"I should think in that case the unknown donor was

a woman," ventured the Duc de Choiseuil, "and a jolly rich one at that."

"You are under a strange protection, Michael," mused the Painter. "I wonder what saint it is?"

"Or devil," I debated.

"I hope not, Michael," objected the Painter gravely. "Strange tales came to my ears, you know, in Marseilles, that Levinski found you had fled, broke the curio-shop open, raving that he loved you one moment, and vowing he would kill you in the next."

The Painter and the Duc de Choiseuil exchanged glances.

"I hated him," I stated simply, "he drank and gambled away the money you gave him for my violin lessons, wanted to take the Guadagnini violin away from me, that you gave me."

"Yes."

"Declared he was going to be my sole guardian and keeper."

Once again my hearers exchanged glances.

"Well, I bolted."

The Painter laughed heartily, "And you left that delightful notice on the door, Michael; how funny, and how like you."

"Yes I left that notice on the door."

"You were a very remarkable youngster, Michael."

The Painter touched an electric bell for a servant to bring our coats.

"Knowing your history now, Michael, as I do, I think you will be all the more likely to open your heart to the petition the students are going to make you to-night."

"What is the petition about?"

"It's for a youngster, like you were once, remarkable kid also I hear.

"Left to the mercy of the world, and living from hand to mouth, put up, fed, God knows how by the students, now in one studio, now in another."

"What does he do?"

"Plays the violin."

"Oh, all right, I will see what can be done."

Cator placed the precious violin case inside the waiting car, with a face that looked set and severe.

Cator did not approve of his master playing when it was not a concert. Cator had learned moreover that the place we were going to was situated in a quite low part of Paris.

Cator shivered slightly as he took his seat in front.

The Café des Beaux Arts had indeed undergone a startling transformation. If, as the Painter affirmed, my name and supposed connection with the place, had transformed it to such an extent, I must have unconsciously wrought a great deal. The place was aglow with shaded lights and cosy curtains.

It seated about a hundred people packed fairly close together. Nothing remained of my bygone haunt save the fireplace, and two of the old wooden pew-like seats upon either side of it, partly enclosing it from the room.

The old patron, humbug that he was, could not even remember me, since he mistook me for the Duc de Choiseuil, much to my amusement. His effusive greeting greatly disgusted the young Duc, who had certainly not carried out his avowed intention of appearing as a student, but was dressed exactly as he had sat down to dinner with us.

"Saviour of my house," whined the old hypocrite, rubbing his bony hands together, one upon the other. "Behold how from a dirty scrubby little boy, when you arose to genius, you raised me."

The young Duc de Choiseuil stared at the old patron with a sort of amused unblinking regard.

"I have never been inside your beastly place in my life," he returned equably. "I was never dirty, or scrubby; had I ever had the misfortune to visit you here before, I might conceivably have been both."

"Michael, do you know this man?"

"Can't remember him at all," I declared maliciously, "he appears to suffer from a similar defect of memory, but in more respects than one, for nobody can ever remember me either scrubby or dirty."

There was a great hum and chatter in the room, as we entered unobserved.

How happy the students were, seated round the tables, gesticulating, laughing, finishing their wine; it was like the old days in Warsaw.

The days I was fast forgetting.

Suddenly someone whispered a word down one of the tables. Our presence was known, and a big cheer went up; it kept on and on.

The cheers died down and swiftly over the room stole a silence, a hushed expectancy.

Amidst that growing stillness was subtly intermingled

a straining eagerness to listen. This became so alive and keen that I could actually feel the impression of it all around me in the room as I quietly tuned my violin.

I believe a smile must have flickered for a second over my face.

The mellowed shades of the little apricot-coloured lights added a glow to the eager audience of students turned towards me.

Somehow I received the odd impression that I was about to play to a room-full of about one hundred intelligent children at a Christmas Party.

Children who were nevertheless stupendous critics, yet all prepared to be upon my side, to an individual.

Yes they were really like children, lovable, impressionable, brilliant children.

I knew well how poor they were, and yet how proud. How extravagant they seemed, yet how frugally they were compelled to live.

Some of them with great futures, many with none, others utterly hopeless.

They should all have of my very best, I resolved, now, and whilst the evening lasted, until its end.

Was it coincidence merely, or some odd trick of memory suggested by the atmosphere of the very room where I had first heard it, that made me fix upon Bach's "Chaçonne" for violin alone, unaccompanied, to play to them.

Something of the atmosphere in which I had felt myself steeped during the afternoon concert, still clung around me, perhaps.

I never remembered playing the "Chaçonne" with greater depth of purity. Seldom had I known it take such possession of my soul.

The grand vibrant chords the master had written, swept their melody to the stars.

Bach's flawless arpeggios, melted their rainbow dripping colours into the night, flooding everything with subtle emotion.

Absorbed as I was, one can always be conscious of secondary thoughts, lightning-like in their appearance and disappearance.

Across my mind an impression flashed, as I played.

I was giving far more to the "Chaçonne" than Adrian Levinski ever gave.

Why should this be, I thought, and how was it possible? The answer flashed back.

Because of Maliol's gift.

When I had finished, they all stood up as with one accord, nevertheless their attitude was positively reverent in comparison with the scene at the afternoon concert, although they shouted out their heart's joy in several different languages.

The Italian bis, bis, coiled like a snake, nay a very giant python, around the room.

Four times I played to them, and upon each occasion I selected a different instrument from the perfect quartette of violins inside the case upon the table before me.

A sudden idea that might give them all an added enjoyment, had crossed my mind.

Finally they pleaded for Schubert's "Ave Maria", and my own "Berceuse" that all Paris was raving over, they declared. So they besought me to play it to them as it would be their only chance of hearing it.

A long-haired student, wearing a black satin bow, which entirely cut off his neck, dividing his head from his body, stepped forward.

Seizing the pianoforte accompaniments which the Painter was jealousy guarding, he fought his way to the corner, where the grand piano stood, and suggestively gave me chords for the A.

The pitch was perfect, I had a shrewd suspicion that someone must have spent the afternoon in carefully tuning the instrument.

The exalted spirituality of the "Ave Maria", followed by the hushed human touch of the rocking cradle, with the angel hovering near, appeared to touch them more than anything I had played.

As I crossed the room from the piano, and they knew I had finished playing for them, they broke into a frenzy of applause. Such a spontaneous outburst, carrying within it a sound deeper than gratitude, overwhelming, like the expression of some great love.

Yes, overwhelming, like the love that was beginning to fill my own heart.

I knew it must be part of the love that Marie had awakened in me.

Amidst the din, I whispered my sudden resolve, formed

a few minutes since, to the Painter and the Duc de Choiseuil.

They nodded and agreed to back me up.

In a distant doorway, the dazed and utterly bewildered face of the patron of the Beaux Arts, seemingly mesmerized, followed me with his eyes.

I think myself he was struggling hopelessly with the problem of endeavouring to reconcile my performance with the little boy, who had stayed at his house. A child whom the patron believed unable to play the violin at all.

I feel certain he was wondering if the strange merchant Maliol could possibly by any chance be the Devil.

I sometimes wondered the same thing myself.

The banging of tables, shouts, uplifted glasses, still went on.

I replaced my violin in its case, and held up my hands for silence. It was given to me at once.

"Gentlemen," I said, "and brother guests." A shout of laughter went up. "Brother gues s", they told each other delightedly. "That is good, coming from the great artiste. "Brother guests, ho! ho! *beautiful*." I proceeded.

"All of you I see have menu cards upon the table before you; doubtless with so many artists present, most of you have pencils about you somewhere. Many of you may have heard that I have become the possessor of a very wonderful gift, from an unknown donor. The gift consists of four among the finest violins in the world, and these, moreover, enclosed in a case which is priceless and certainly unique.

"Merely by way of a brief amusement before I leave you all, I suggest a little competition.

"The four violins I possess are Antonius Stradivarius, Joseph Guarnerius, Carlo Bergonzi and Gasparo da Salo. Have you taken the names down?"

"Yes!" they shouted, "we have the names down:" Others shouted, "We know them, but we don't know which is which".

"Precisely," I nodded, "I have played you four pieces.

"State which violin I played each piece upon, and in the order in which I played them. Then fold the papers up and bring them here. My friends and myself will decide."

"Come, we will have first, second, third and fourth prizes for the four most nearly correct."

The young Duc de Choiseuil looked across the table at me. There was a gleam of merriment in his eyes, together with a sort of wondering understanding. He undoubtedly guessed what I was about to do, and why I was urged to do it.

The students scribbled with feverish ecstasy; they knitted their brows, they pondered deeply, many of the pencil points were nibbled away through over-anxiety and had to be repointed.

"Why Michael," the Painter laughingly whispered to me, "not one of them will guess correctly. I don't believe you could tell correctly yourself, unless you knew and recognized the instruments."

"Hush," I said, "what does it matter. I have found a subtle way of helping them, without a suspicion of hurting their feelings."

"Michael, you are wonderful," breathed the Painter.

"Make the prizes substantial ones, eh?"

"Rather," I answered.

"My purse is at your disposal, dear Michael."

"Mine also," declared the young Duc excitedly. "By Jove! what a ripping idea."

"Michael, when did you think of it?"

"Whilst I was playing."

"Ah, then I was right, I thought you were with the angels."

I shivered slightly.

The young Duc knew nothing of the complete dominion of Maliol over me and my playing.

A dominion, that for some unknown reason, seemed to be growing stronger and stronger.

Shyly, and in groups, like flocks of sheep, the great fellows gathered round the table.

Bearded, clean-shaven, short, tall, some mere boys, all were intrigued by the impromptu game of guessing the violins correctly.

When they had all re-seated themselves at the tables we opened the papers and went carefully through them.

"Told you so," whispered the Painter, as he noted the suspicion of a smile on my face. "Not one of them right, eh?"

"No," I agreed, "what shall we make the prizes?"

The Duc de Choiseuil, the Painter, and myself, conferred. We could muster up two thousand francs between us.

"Well," I declared, "first prize a thousand francs, second five hundred, and two at two hundred and fifty. You know them, who will share out best with the others?"

"The young painter over there with the red hair and beard."

"Yes."

"Next the man with the tie, who played your accompaniments."

"Yes, you know their names and have marked them?"

"Yes."

"The others?"

"Oh, one a musician, and one a sculptor, who are looking after little Bracova."

"You will soon know, there is going to be a bigger call still upon your charity this evening, Michael, as I told you before we started."

"Shall I be equal to the strain?"

"Yes, Michael."

"I warn you I won't play another note."

"No Michael, you have done well, and earned your rest, old chap."

The Painter rose to his feet; he received hearty cheers of right goodwill as the donor of the banquet.

"Not one of you fellows were entirely correct in your lists," announced the Painter.

The remark was received with laughter and more cheering.

The excitement may be said to have reached its height when the Painter announced the amount of money in cash awarded as the prizes.

The red-bearded painter, as he advanced to claim his prize looked as if heaven had opened at his feet.

Perhaps it had.

"One thousand francs," he murmured wildly.

The pianist appeared to be smitten with a sort of St. Vitus' dance of joy, simultaneously kissing the notes as if they were his first love.

Perhaps they were.

The unnoticed musician, and sculptor, who had hitherto apparently been responsible for the little unknown Bracova, clutched their notes and appeared to be offering

silent thanks to the Almighty for unexpected benefits received.

Subsequently, upon learning more of their history, I believe my surmise regarding this was probably correct.

Slowly, one by one, others stole up, and I found I had a deputation facing me. They gathered round me like children pleading for a half-holiday.

They wanted me in my greatness, they said shamefacedly, to help someone.

I had the means and the power, and the art, would I give just one concert for them in Paris, the place would be packed, and it was the only way they could think of raising the money necessary for the little Yavil Bracova.

I shook my head, I was booked up for months to come.

"Oh, M'sieur Caviol," they pleaded, "we do not ask for ourselves but for the little Bracova, who is a genius. Indeed m'sieur, he is but fourteen years old. He plays already the violin most beautifully. Oh, of course, not like you, m'sieur."

"He is a little Servian, but he is good and brave. He carries on his body the marks of the Bulgarians' bayonets, when he, among the other Servians, was driven out."

"Yes, he carries those cruel bayonet scars to his grave m'sieur, but he is brave, he struggled on. Two years he had at Vienna Conservatoire, and then no money to pay his fees."

"We keep him among us, sometimes at one studio, sometimes at another, and sometimes we feed him, between us. We love him and we help him."

"But m'sieur, how can we give him his fees for that Conservatoire at St. Petersburg, where he has to go now. Even his violin has had to be parted with. It brought little."

"M'sieur, the little Bracova would have played to-night so that you might have heard him and yourself would have been convinced, but the little Bracova is shy, he declared, nothing would induce him to play before so great a master."

"He has never refused before to play m'sieur, for he plays quite beautifully, but he refused."

I nodded.

Two of the students who had been telling me this in a sort of concerted duet paused. There were tears in their eyes; yet they, good fellows that they were, struggled with their evident emotion and continued their pleading.

"Dear M'sieur Michael, dear Maestro, only think for our sake, how you, when only a little boy, may once have needed help yourself as badly as the little Bracova does now. The little bright one, who bears upon his body the vile bayonet thrusts of the accursed Bulgars who drove him from his village. The little brave one."

I glanced at the Painter, he was regarding me earnestly, almost wistfully.

"I cannot give a concert," I said.

How their faces fell, they gave a sort of long-drawn "oh" of disappointment; they snuffled uneasily upon their feet.

"Because," I continued, "I am booked up."

I dropped my voice so that only the deputation could hear me.

"Oh, yes, but I will help your little Bracova. I guarantee his fees at the Conservatoire and his living in reason, for the remaining years that he will have to finish his course. Where do you say it is? St. Petersburg Conservatoire?"

"Yes m'sieur, St. Petersburg, because he has a relative there now."

"Oh, M'sieur Michael, what can we say, how shall we tell him."

"Wait a moment, tell him something else. I am doing this to the memory and for the sake of one here among you, who did so much for me when I too was a child, and, as you say, when I needed it so badly myself.

"The violin he then gave me, and which I have cherished all my life, I will give to your protégé, little Bracova, upon condition that he never parts with it."

"If he calls at the Hôtel Meurice to-morrow morning he shall have the violin—it is a Guadagnini—and a cheque for his first year at St. Petersburg. After that my business manager Pomponard will forward the cheque regularly, as he needs it.

"But where is this extraordinary kid who won't play, and seemingly declines to appear? Cannot you produce him?"

The good fellows paused only to wring my hands, incidentally an excruciatingly painful proceeding, before rushing in a body to the other end of the room.

Here they pounded, and punched, and shouted at some

hidden individual, presumably the little Yavil Bracova, whilst telling him of the good tidings.

Finally they hoisted him upon their shoulders, and I saw a little sturdy chap with bright dark eyes, brown complexion, and straight coal-black hair cut in bristles all over his head. His stubby brown hands vainly clutched the hair upon the heads of the enthusiastic students, who were hoisting him upon high.

"Look at him Maestro," they shouted; "see he, Yavil, is overjoyed, he is grateful, but he is tongue-tied."

I was almost beset with a vague fear as they hugged and jostled him here and there, that in their excitement they intended to give me ocular proof of the bayonet wounds. His slender clothing looked as if it could not survive the tussle.

I waved to him in greeting, he smiled at me and vociferated to the others as he struggled, that he could not thank me before all these people; he would wait till afterwards, he said, and he stepped down and away from his too enthusiastic captors.

"Look here, Michael," announced the Painter, "I mean to share in this expense."

"So do I," declared the Duc de Choiseuil.

I shook my head.

"No, if I have the opportunity of doing a decent thing by myself, let me do it. I have need to make much reparation."

"Why, Michael, you speak as if you had committed all the sins in the decalogue many times over."

"Perhaps I have."

"I wouldn't believe that," said the young Duc, "not if an angel or even a devil came to earth and told me so."

Again I shivered slightly and thought of Maliol.

What could be the reason for these constantly recurring and haunting thoughts of Maliol. Daily they seemed to become clearer, more marked, more insistent.

The last toasts were drunk, the final cheers given, the thanks and the good-byes exchanged, and Nicolo appeared at my side, silent, thoughtful, waiting to take my precious violin case with its still more precious contents.

"Good night, Michael," said the Painter. "God bless you, old chap. Remember, you dine with us to-morrow night."

"Right! then I'm off to play in Monte Carlo."

"I am accompanying you there," said the young Duc, "taking you in my car. Au revoir, Prince of all violinists, au revoir!"

All the others had gone out in groups. I turned to Nicolo.

"Take the case in the car back to the hotel, Nicolo, I shall walk."

"Are you sure, Master Michael?"

"Quite, thank you, Nicolo, it is a lovely night."

Nicolo left as silently as he had entered.

Only little Bracova was left, and one other student, who had walked over to the little wooden enclosure around the fire where I had so often sat as a child.

The excitable little Servian, before I had divined what he was going to do, darted swift as a swallow across the room to the table where I sat. He flung his arms round my neck and hugged me then, before I could stop him, he slipped on his knees before me, his dark, intelligent face looking up to me, and said:

"I think you are a god, I worship you, I will give my life for you if you ever want me to."

Rather brusquely I jerked him up upon his feet.

"Never kneel to anyone of this world, and as for worship, only give that to your art."

"You have made my life, M'sieur Caviol."

"Helping, perhaps—the making lies only within your own power."

"My heart is very full, I love you for all you have done for me. I shall never play like you, but I shall always hold you before my eyes."

I smiled at the eager face.

Then he seized my hands—"a Servian does not forget. Bless me and I will bid farewell of you."

What an odd idea. Was I a Biblical Patriarch, that he should desire anything so old-fashioned?

I laid my hand lightly upon the black cropped head of bristles.

"Do your best, old chap, work hard, come to the Hôtel Meurice in the morning for the violin I have promised you."

He let go his stubby brown hands, which I found had been gripping me with some considerable strength. He continued looking at me, as if he wanted to take an imperishable mental photograph, then he made two odd

bows, and bolted out of the now deserted restaurant; yet not quite deserted, for the student I had noticed before, lingering after all the others had left, still remained standing in the ingle nook before the fire.

Something in the curious attitude of stillness arrested my attention. I crossed over to the old fireplace.

The figure turned and looked at me, and I was amazed when I realized it was Rosa Baumer, dressed and cleverly disguised as a male student.

Her hair was done in a wonderful way so that it merely appeared long, the loose jacket and trousers only served to disguise her figure.

She would have passed as a youthful student anywhere in a crowd, among people who had not known her by sight.

"How did you get in?" I asked in astonishment.

"I bribed one of the students to bring me, also the patron."

"Have you been here all the evening?"

"Yes," she answered, still looking into the fire. "It has been a wonderful evening, too. You promised to see me again; well, there it is, I chose to-night. Better surely than meeting you at an hotel before other people. Here I can talk to you."

I was silent, I could not for the life of me find anything to say.

"Just now," she continued, "a child in his love and gratitude for what you have done for him, flung his arms round your neck and kissed you. Oh, Michael! Michael! give as much to me, don't let me be the only one to go away without—without——"

With all the tenderness I could master, conscious of the knowledge that there was not the faintest response in my heart, I bent my head down to her. Looking in my eyes, she folded her arms around my neck, and kissed me, as nobody had ever kissed me, except Marie Zelovska.

Two women, and yet what a difference. She kissed me as if she was taking a last, long, passionate farewell of me.

She was taking that farewell, but I never knew of it until long afterwards. Had I known, should I have acted differently? I might have done so, yet somehow I do not think I cared enough. I who knew so little of love, and yet had learned lately so much.

Slowly she slipped her arms from around my neck

down my shoulders and arms, then her hands touched mine.

I noticed they were quite cold, so I drew her nearer to the fire to warm them.

"I have been allowed to see a new aspect of you to-night, Michael."

"Yes?"

"I needed no further revelation of you as an artiste, although to-night you were superb. I followed you from city to city because I adored your playing.

"To-night I discovered that you have a wonderful heart, a generosity above other men—yes, even for me, Michael.

"Before little Bracova left, I turned to the fire, Michael, for I was crying. I realized, as he did, perhaps more, what you have done for him.

"Don't be offended, Michael, at what I am going to say. I shall not have the opportunity ever of a long talk with you again, and perhaps it will make it easier when I tell you I am psychic to an unusual degree, far more so than most people imagine. You have gone all your life utterly without love. Not adulation, not adoration, or even openly offered idolatry, but without love.

"Then you loved a woman."

"Yes."

"You will always love her."

"Yes."

"She has only just come into your life."

"Yes."

"Then I was just too late."

She twisted her clasped hands together in front of the fire. There was not a single ring upon them. Only the little feminine handkerchief she crushed into a fluffy ball, would have betrayed her sex, had she brought it out earlier in the evening.

"Because I am psychic," she continued. "I know there is something else in your life, some power so mighty, enfolding you like a gigantic shadow, spiritual undoubtedly, but whether of good or evil I cannot tell. Whatever it may be, it will always stand between you and your love."

For the third time that evening I felt a shiver run through me at her words.

"Once in Naples, and again in Vienna, it was repeated

to me that you had sold yourself to the devil."

"Ah! yes, they said that also about Paganini."

"I know, but in your case I laughed."

"Why?"

She looked at me with her strange glittering eyes, long and earnestly.

"Because you have the face of an angel, Michael, you had that when you were a little boy."

"You did not know me then—and I am afraid you are guessing as wide of the mark as you are now."

"Oh, Michael, Michael, you don't know much about a woman's eyes, or a woman's thoughts, if you think I have not many a time stood in the famous gallery and absorbed the picture of you as the little Ishmael."

"I don't know anybody knew that, save three people."

"I didn't know, but I just recognized it at once. You haven't changed a bit."

"Haven't changed?"

"Only from the little Ishmael to the full-grown one."

"Why Ishmael?"

"You will always be that."

"Oh! surely not, why?"

"I don't know; something that makes you alone, and if I can use the term, beyond all others as an artiste, and I should think as a man; the same power whatever it is will keep you jealously alone and apart, and oh! dear God, I hope it won't be as bad for you as for me.

"Kiss me again, Michael, and see me home now; my car is waiting close handy. No, don't refuse, you need not stay. Just a drink and a cigarette and a few minutes when we reach my house for you to be alone, whilst I change.

"A woman's whim, Michael, I want you to remember me dressed as a woman, as a Parisienne can dress. Then a cigarette together and good-bye, bon voyage to you, and"—she hesitated a second—"and bon voyage to me also."

That night, long after I was fast asleep in the Hôtel Meurice, Rosa Baumer shot herself.

A few wild scribbled words of farewell, my name of Michael only mentioned in that last message.

My name in connection with the dedication in her book of poems was sufficient for the world to surmise many things. The world was quite wrong in its surmise.

The world guesses incorrectly, very often, for sometimes the simple truth is hidden away from it.

* * * *

Once again I was seated in Anton Vollmark's inner salon in Dresden; sitting upon that very couch of bygone French Queens, from which Marie Zelovska had first risen to greet me in all her beauty.

I was thinking of her, and of her alone.

Something, I knew not what, had drawn me to the place again, so after the concert I had given in Leipsic, I had made the journey.

I told myself that I only wanted to find out from Vollmark who had given me the precious case of violins, yet I knew this was not the true reason for my coming to Vollmark. I wanted to hear more of Marie Zelovska.

Never a word about her could I get out of the old dealer. From his adamantine reticence he might have been guarding some State secret in which she was the chief personage. Neither would he tell me, even by a hint, the name of the unknown donor of the princely present that had been made to me.

"Was it a royal personage?" I asked.

Vollmark was not permitted to say.

Could he tell me if the giver was a man, or a woman?

Vollmark shook his head, adjusted his big horn-rimmed spectacles, and adroitly changed the conversation by enquiring:

"And now, will M'sieur Michael be pleased to inform a sorely puzzled old man—why—when but a few weeks ago you confessed you were unable to give anything like such a sum as ten thousand pounds for the case of violins, you take my breath away by declaring you are going to buy an antique necklace costing far more money. These matched sapphires in their quatro cento setting are priceless of their kind. The necklace alone will cost you twelve thousand pounds. I suppose you want it for some woman?"

"Yes! I don't wear them myself."

"Humph." The old dealer paused for a moment and smiled, took off his spectacles, polished them thoughtfully, and waved vaguely around the now packed salon.

"In addition, this collection, small yet perfect, you

have just viewed, sold to me for half its worth by a Russian nobleman, you wish to possess the entire collection also?"

"Yes."

Lingeringly the old man indicated each rare object as he ticked them off upon his fingers.

"A Rubens."

"For my music-room at St. Freeda's. I love it."

"A Nicholas 'Maes'."

"Superb for the same room, the colour——"

"Quite, quite—but——"

"Five Jan Steens, tavern subjects, on panels."

"For St. Freeda's dining-room this time. They are full of life and good cheer."

"The Raphael Mengs 'Cupid'."

"Those folded azure wings and the thin scarlet ribbon round the sleeping body, the golden arrows spilled upon the ground, settled me, in conjunction with the flesh painting—it's gorgeous. That goes over a fireplace inevitably."

"Two Nicholas 'Poussins'," continued the dealer.

"Little gems; I shall compare them with vistas of my wild woods around St. Freeda's, always after dusk, so that I shall see them live again in my own old panelled room."

"The original Duc D'Orleans bed carved with his arms, the hangings on scarlet and gold with his arms and crest, and the old needlework coverlet."

"I am sure it had posts once, yet I prefer it as it is. It will exactly suit St. Freeda's."

"Perfect collection of Charles II furniture and silver," continued Vollmark. "Long narrow table, two settees, carved window-seat with cane back, eight silver candlesticks, complete and genuine."

"I shall dine in St. Freeda's at the table, and sit on one of the forms. I don't suppose they will be too hard beneath those faded old red silk cushions and tassels."

"Then, M'sieur Michael, there are these ten carved Flemish brackets of the early 15th century. They are assuredly among the most beautiful things in this collection and certainly the most unique. They must have been taken from some great cathedral once. You see they represent the ten miracles; and observe the marvellous carving."

"Yes, Vollmark, why see, they have all worn to the colour of polished gamboge."

"Of course, M'sieur Michael, taking your extraordinary life into consideration, you doubtless believe in miracles?"

"Perhaps."

"There is also the finest Grinling Gibbons carved oblong mirror I have ever seen."

"That will have to go over the fireplace, although I dislike mirrors in a room."

"Nevertheless, women like them, M'sieur Michael." The old man looked at me with a sly smile. "They like to see that their hair is straight."

"Yes, Vollmark, doubtless many bygone beauties have admired themselves in this particular one."

"Last, but not least, a unique but small collection of perfect old Bow and old Lowestoft china, all of them exhibition pieces."

"Very appropriate for St. Freeda's—being thoroughly English. Well—is that all?"

"Are all these lovely things not enough."

I laughed. "For the present, Vollmark."

"No, M'sieur Michael, for good as far as I myself am concerned. I am going to retire."

"Retire—you—why?"

"I have my reasons, and I have made sufficient for the little Renal and Gabrielle and myself, it is time to retire. M'sieur Michael I bought this collection cheap, very cheap, I will pass it on to you at a small percentage, not the exquisite necklace there, no, that is a different matter.

"Let me add up and see what the necklace with the collection and all amounts to."

The old dealer jotted down notes with his gold pencil-case in a little book.

"The total sum in English money, M'sieur Michael, is sixty-five thousand five hundred pounds."

He looked at me and hesitated.

"You have played at many concerts, M'sieur Michael, and doubtless you have the rest of your life, I should think, fully booked up, but you could scarcely have made so vast a sum in the time since I saw you last, when you told me you couldn't manage to pay even ten thousand pounds."

I laughed at him gaily and gently pushed him into one of his priceless arm-chairs.

"Listen, Vollmark, of course I am making money faster than I can spend ever it, but not such sums as the one you have just mentioned.

"You know the young Duc de Choiseuil."

"Yes, he is one of my clients."

"Good, he has also become a friend of mine recently. After my concert at Monte Carlo, he persuaded me to visit the tables there. It was my first appearance in the gambling salons, and since gambling doesn't interest me at all, it will probably be my last.

"Because I had plenty of money, and didn't care in the least whether I won or lost, by the perversity of fate I won, and won, and continued winning.

"There came a time when the croupier rang his little bell for further money for the table. The largest sized paper cheque I should imagine ever printed, was further presented to me, signed by about eight people. It amused me, but didn't excite me in the least.

"I had won nearly six thousand pounds. When I started to lose some hundreds of it, the young Duc de Choiseuil showed his wisdom. He insisted upon my leaving the tables with him, which I did.

"When we reached our hotel, he excitedly made me a proposition, declaring his belief that I should bring him luck.

"A racehorse of his was running, called St. Sebastian. He begged me to put three thousand pounds of the money I had not expected to win, and was not in any need of, upon his horse. He told me he was putting a similar amount upon the horse himself. I remember, jokingly, asking him if St. Sebastian was not shot with arrows? He replied that his St. Sebastian's feet were shod with them. He very frankly told me that neither jockeys nor trainers believed in the horse.

"The young Duc declared that his was the only faith in St. Sebastian; that he was convinced it would win; even if it didn't I hadn't really lost anything; and wound up by declaring he could get twenty to one upon it."

Anton Vollmark's eyes were sparkling and he leaned forward in his chair, betraying for him, an unusual excitement.

"Yes, yes, M'sieur Michael, and then—ah! I know nothing alas! about horse racing."

"Nor I, Vollmark, but the young Duc seems to have

known. We won sixty thousand pounds apiece."

"Monsieur Michael?"

"Yes, extraordinary wasn't it, and more singular still that it should have happened to me, since I had never before in my life either gambled or bet. So you see, Vollmark, I am only really spending my ill-gotten gains. Investing it, to make St. Freeda's Priory the home I love, more than any home on earth, a place of the highest art and beauty.

"I have another reason—I do not want to have too much money. Money might spoil my art. It might, perhaps, prevent me from working as hard as I should have done otherwise. Too much money, Vollmark, ruins life and corrodes the soul."

Anton Vollmark was silent, possibly he considered my words as a javelin aimed at one of his cherished gods.

All his life Anton Vollmark had worshipped money, and reverenced its power.

The old dealer sat silently thinking for some time, before making some apparently irrelevant remarks, the particular drift of which I was not able to fathom.

"Are you wise, do you think, in buying this sapphire necklace and this collection? There may be a day, not very far off," he said, "when money, and only big sums of money safely invested, may be of any use."

"Then I shall have treasure in the private bank of St. Freeda's Priory."

"I said money, M'sieur Michael, *not its supposed equivalent in works of art*. Is it true, M'sieur Michael, that the great Moritz Leibner persuaded you to become a naturalized Polish citizen?"

"Yes, I did it to please him, he had been the great friend and instructor of my life, he seemed to greatly desire me to do so."

"Did you never think why?"

"No, it was a whim of his, and for me, what did it matter? I was a child of no country in particular. French father, Celtic mother, Italian great-grandfather, Celtic grandmother. I belonged to no city that could claim me for its own. The best of my early life and education had taken place at Warsaw."

Vollmark nodded, then added musingly:

"The Russian noble, whose name I prefer not to give, loved the collection you have just agreed to buy, loved it

like his very life. Why do you suppose he parted with it?"

"Impossible to say. I certainly should never have parted with it had it been mine. Perhaps he needed the money."

"I think not, he is already very rich, yet he may be making sure of more money whilst there is time. I, too, remember, M'sieur Michael, am realizing my money and retiring."

"Here in Dresden?"

"No, I shall go abroad."

"Where?"

"I shall wait upon events. You are determined to buy the necklace."

"Yes."

"And the collection?"

"Yes, give me a pen and I will write you the cheque now. You will pack them ever so carefully, won't you? Think of the joy when I unpack them at St. Freeda's. I shall be there in fifteen days' time; they will be waiting for me then, when I arrive."

"Yes."

"That exacting Pomponard has booked me for a concert in Venice after all, or I should be home sooner."

"M'sieur Michael!"

"Well!"

"You can knock off the odd five hundred pounds."

"No! no! Vollmark."

"As you will."

Anton Vollmark stepped round the screens into another room and returned bearing a tiny panel and a second small picture.

Without even showing them to me, he lovingly wrapped a piece of old brocaded silk between the pictures, enfolding them both with its end. He then carefully wrapped them in the violet-coloured paper he always used, and tied the parcel neatly with tape.

"Take these with you now, M'sieur Michael," he said. "So light you can carry them; a little panel by Francois Clouet of a Huguenot, a tiny group of the Holy Family by Corregio."

I stared at him in amazement.

"Yes, you look surprised—well, it is the only gift Anton Vollmark has ever made to a client in his life. I

give them to you because you are the only man I have ever met who possesses an inordinate love of the beautiful, and a knowledge almost equal to my own. If empires rocked and countries were smitten by fire and sword, plague or famine, there would still somewhere be a market for those two little pictures.

"Don't thank me, it spoils the only gift I have ever given. But tell me one thing—where did you acquire your strange uncanny knowledge of pictures, furniture and curios?"

"I kept a curio-shop when I was a little boy."

Anton Vollmark laughed. "Ah! I see. What a strange child you must have been. Put the peerless necklace safely in your inside pocket—so, guard the pictures well. Unpack the other treasures safely when you reach your far-distant English home. Farewell, M'sieur Michael, God keep you."

"And you, Anton Vollmark, my friend; but why farewell, we shall assuredly meet again, shall we not?"

Anton Vollmark shook his head.

* * * *

Pomponard brought the little note to me that night in the artists' room, before the concert started in Venice. It seemed impregnated in some subtle way with the odour of violets.

"It 'ees most important," commented Pomponard, "it 'ees, of course, from a womans. Bah! it 'ees a complaint of all ze womens, zey zink you so important to zem. All of zese silly over-bedecked geese, wiz zeir jewels all tinkle, tinkle, and zeir feathers rustle, rustle.

"You play ze divine Brahms to-night, zey all shiver and say 'e play it to me'. Bah! Ze exquisite Corelli Air Varie unaccompanied. Zey whisper 'it is of me 'e zink'. Bah! Ze delicate Bach Prelude in E, its lovely wave of colour only 'eighten ze effect of zeir rouge.

"Surely zey all zay, 'e loves me, 'e play to me alone'. Ah!—Bah!——"

Pomponard departed eventually, having given me the information that an Emperor and Empress were present, three Royal Princesses, and a Russian Princess declared to be the most lovely woman in Europe, or out of it for that matter.

I paid no heed to him. I was reading the little magic note, so brief, yet so beautiful to me.

Wonders of wonders, she was in Venice, she would be present at the concert.

Then a little intimate sentence at the end, bade me come straight after the concert to where a gondola, burning a purple and green light at the prow, would be waiting for me.

She would be alone.

After that, only the signature, Marie Zelovska.

I kissed the signature, for her hand had written it. Yes, I was right, the note *was* perfumed with violets.

Whilst I tuned my violin softly at the side, I quietly peeped through a tiny chink in the curtain, into the auditorium. She was seated right in the front with an elaborately dressed oldish woman—I imagined the Grand Duchess Vassili.

I had never seen Marie dressed as she was now.

Notwithstanding the Royal ladies present, Marie outshone them all, for she looked herself like a Royal Princess.

Diamonds like dew-drops glistened all over her head of dark curls. A gleaming gown, of pale heliotrope shade, revealed her perfect neck and throat.

Upon the stage the orchestra tuned and boomed and buzzed, and drums tapped and beat.

My heart beat with those drums, and buzzed with the bassoons, and then seemed to soar with the violins.

A little space, and then the violins and all the other strings quietened and sank lower into the one-sounded chord of A.

My heart did not sink with them, no, it still soared upward.

The ecstasy of the thought held possession of me that she would soon be listening only to my violin. She should thrill and feel all the coloured melody I could pour out of my soul to her, and for her, through the medium of the strings.

They told me afterwards that I had played that night like one in a dream, yet as one who is inspired.

The love of Marie had inspired me.

I was playing only to her, and somehow I felt that those dark wonderful eyes of hers never left me.

After the concert I would not wait for either Pomponard or Nicolo, but seized my violin case, and literally

ran out of a side-door used by men of the orchestra. I bolted for the quay where the gondola with its coloured lights was waiting.

The stalwart gondolier made way for me as I stepped into the gondola, and down into its little roofed and windowed box.

After the tumult of my greeting at the end of the concert, with its glow of charm and excitement, the sight of Marie Zelovska's face gave me a sudden chill.

She greeted me, but there was a difference.

She seemed cold, unapproachable, almost imperial.

"Marie, why do you look at me like that? What is troubling you? I did not ever dream I should meet you in Venice."

"I journeyed to Venice on purpose to see you," she replied.

"So I have the added joy of seeing you here as well as in England."

"I may not go to England at all, Michael."

"Marie! Why?"

From her evening cloak she took out and unfolded a French newspaper and held it towards me.

"You cannot read the column that concerns you, that also concerns me, by the light of that swaying lantern," she pointed above her head. "In any case, you would be unable to read it with the gondola going at the pace I bade the gondolier make.

"I brought it for your explanation, for your refutation, if you can give any such thing."

"Some ridiculous paragraph, I suppose, that has been written about me. Surely, Marie, you do not hold me responsible for every sensational thing the Press think they have discovered."

"It purports to be the true account of the death of Rosa Baumer, the poetess, who as good as confesses, in her last letter, that she killed herself for love of you, Michael."

I was silent, I felt amazed and very hurt.

"You loved her?" demanded Marie.

"Never."

"How long had you known her?"

"For one day only."

"Michael!"

"It is the truth."

"You never loved her?"

"No!"

"But she loved you, must have adored you."

I took a sudden resolve. "Marie I will say nothing about the dead woman. I only met her for a brief few hours, she never injured me, nor was she anything to me. If, indeed, she loved me like that, I am more bitterly sorry for her than any words of mine will express.

"So far as I know she was a good and a great woman.

"I hope with all my soul she may find somewhere, somehow, the peace she was not able to discover on earth."

A change crept over Marie Zelovska's face.

"I love you for that, Michael," she said softly. "I think I understand, I might have known you were different to other men. I ought to have known and trusted you. Poor woman," breathed Marie Zelovska. "Oh! poor woman, I am so sorry for her death now."

"So am I, Marie, more sorry than any words can express; it seemed to me a useless, hopeless sacrifice."

"That is what I thought I might be about to make, a useless, hopeless sacrifice. That is why, Michael, I journeyed all the way to Venice to see you, and find out for myself.

"I will never share the man I love with anyone upon earth."

I enfolded her in my arms before she could stop me. I kissed her wonderful upturned face. I closed her dark starry eyes with kisses.

"Marie, I love you."

"Yes, Michael."

"I want you to marry me at once."

"I will talk that over with you in England, Michael."

"Why in England, little belovedest."

"There will be more time then, and I shall have many things to tell you, and above all, Michael, do not ever count upon my being able to marry you."

"Marie, I count upon that as I count upon my life, my future, everything.

"Marie, tell me now, here, to-night, what is there to prevent our marriage?

"You are not betrothed to another man, and even if you were, you could never marry him, knowing that you loved me."

"No, Michael, I could never marry anyone else."

"Tell me to-night then, why?"

Marie put her little, soft, white hands upon either side of my face and kissed me. "Not to-night, Michael, darling one, let us be happy to-night."

"I had thought of something to make you very happy," I said, "at least I imagined it would, but somehow, with you, I am never certain."

Marie's eyes sparkled in the dusky blue light.

"What had you thought of to make me happy, Michael?"

"Something I have carried about with me for days in an inside pocket, because I wouldn't put it in a bank, and I didn't dare to trust it out of my sight, so whenever I changed into evening dress, it was always transferred from one pocket to another."

"Michael, you are teasing me now. Have I to guess what it is?"

"Yes."

"A tiny pug dog?"

We both laughed.

"A box of chocolates?"

"Oh, no."

"Michael, don't be sphinx-like, it doesn't suit you."

I nestled my head against her dark curls.

"Who was a little sphinx, when I entered the gondola to-night, imperial, haughty?"

"Oh, Michael."

"Yes, you were, and after the concert, too, when I had played to the top of my power all for you, and you never said one word."

"Michael dear, I had that other thing eating into my heart, devouring all the joy of my life, the awful thing in that paper.

"But Michael, you know, you must know, what I felt whilst you played to-night. It seemed to me like your love enfolding me, surging round me, crowning me, almost stifling me.

"Michael, I have never heard you play so divinely. I could love a man who played like that, whoever he was."

Something in the tone, the words, seemed to recall to me a time when I had heard those words before, uttered in the self-same way.

"You mean you would still love me if I were halt and maimed and blind?"

She laughed. "It would not matter then," she said, "for I, too, should be blind; blind with love".

I slipped out of my pocket an oblong leather case and pressed the spring.

In the misty violet light, the necklace glittered with its vivid stones of fire, wrought in a deeper blue than the night, yet not such a deep violet blue as were her own eyes.

Marie gave a sudden short gasp.

"Michael!—where did you get this necklace."

"It is my betrothal gift to you."

"Oh, Michael! Michael!"

"Why do you look at it like that, Marie, don't you like it?"

By way of answer, Marie Zelovska leant back in the silken-cushioned seat of the gondola, and burst out laughing.

It seemed a strange reception for the gift I had hoped so much for and had thought about such a great deal.

I suppose I looked hurt.

"Oh, Michael! you are a dear, my own darling Michael, and there is nobody like you in the world, but it is really too funny, and I must tell you, or you will never see the joke."

"Joke?" I repeated rather dully. "Well, I suppose I must be deficient in humour, but the only thing I can imagine being funny is that the sapphires of the necklace are not real.

"Break the news gently to me if they are only paste. Woe is me! I know nothing about jewels."

"No, Michael dear, the stones are real enough, the necklace is exquisite.

"You bought this from Anton Vollmark."

"Yes, but how did you know?"

"I have often admired it, Michael, clasp it round my neck, boy, so, now kiss me, yes and hold me in your arms whilst I tell you."

"More secrets, Marie?"

"Yes!

"What do you mean by spending thousands of pounds upon a necklace for me?"

"It was the only thing I could find worthy for you to wear; and how do you know what amount I paid for it?"

"Listen, Michael; this was once my necklace."

"Your necklace?" I almost dropped her out of my arms in sheer astonishment.

"Yes, I sold it to Anton Vollmark for ten thousand pounds; it was the ornament I loved most of all I ever possessed."

"Marie! then why on earth did you sell it?"

"I wanted to make a gift of love also. I bought a case of what they told me were four perfect violins, for the man I loved."

"Oh, Marie! then you—you were the one who——"

"Yes, Michael, so no wonder I laughed. We have just been like two children giving each other very expensive presents."

I laughed, gaily misquoting, "'I wonder what the *Merchants* buy, one half so precious as the things they sell,' surely true in this case, Marie?"

"All the more amusing in this instance, Michael, because for once a very astute merchant did not know what he was buying. I mean of course the necklace. Anton Vollmark is unrivalled in his knowledge of pictures, china, furniture, bric-à-brac, but the necklace was beyond him."

"Why, Marie?"

"He only valued the sapphires; he knew nothing about the great historical value of the necklace, or yet the setting. I did not see fit to inform him, because you see, one day I intended, if it was still for sale, to get it back again."

"What is the history then, and why does the setting make such a difference?"

"The setting, Michael, is by Benvenuto Cellini: the necklace itself has been worn around the necks of at least three Empresses of Russia. Twenty-five thousand pounds has been offered and refused for it, Michael, so for once Anton Vollmark did not know the value of something."

"But Marie, tell me, how did such a wonderful thing come into your possession?"

Marie looked at me for a moment and then answered quite carelessly. "Oh—it was simply handed down to me through my family."

"Of who I know nothing."

"Of whom you know nothing, Michael. Yet one thing you know boy, a woman loves your gift, as I love you."

"And you risked all this, so that I should be able to

play upon those violins. Wicked little extravagant Marie," I scolded.

"Wicked extravagant Michael," retorted Marie. "Where did you get all that money from to buy that necklace? I know Vollmark only too well, he never sells under a vast profit."

"I—oh yes, perhaps I was wicked, I gambled."

"Michael!"

"Yes, gambled heavily at Monte Carlo, and then plunged on a racehorse, and won all the time."

"Oh, Michael, what fun; have you got anything left?"

"Oh rather, more than is good for me. Wait until you see St. Freeda's Priory; you know, Marie, it will be your home some day."

Marie suddenly remained silent, then she said:

"The man has turned the gondola back now, Michael, towards home. Play me a serenade. Not with the bow, play the strings pizzicato, and make it sound, as you can, like a harp, and hum the notes of the melody as you did at Anton Vollmark's that day; to me it is a perfect serenade."

I lay beside her and hummed and played snatches of opera, odd serenades that came into my head, extemporising as I went along.

"What is that you are playing now, Michael?" she asked.

"Oh nothing—a serenade to you."

"It is gorgeous, Michael; don't lose it; will you remember it again?"

"Always."

"What shall you call it?"

"Night in Venice."

"Written for me."

"Yes, and dedicated to you."

"It is an exquisite melody, Michael, set in a shower of golden arpeggios. Why boy, it is like a rainbow."

"So is love, Marie."

"No, Michael, love is like the sun. Play me 'Night in Venice' again."

By way of answer and for fun, I played her "Three Blind Mice" in chords upon the four strings simultaneously and sang the words of that edifying ditty at the same time.

Marie laughed, but she didn't stop me. "Why, you even make that ridiculous thing sound beautiful," she said.

Once more we arranged to meet within a few weeks in England. We were nearing the quay, and the Palazzo

where Marie was staying with the Grand Duchess Vassili.

I had taken Marie in my arms and we were kissing each other farewell, when the gondola, going slowly, glided into the brilliant light of two big lanterns swaying on their quaint carved poles. The sudden light shone full into the windows of our gondola where the curtains were drawn back. A man in evening dress stood upon the lower steps of one of the Palazzo's smoking a cigar, He looked straight into our gondola.

I recognized him at once. It was the young Duc de Choiseuil. He seemed to start slightly, as if very astonished and continued to look after us as the gondola moved on.

"That was the Duc de Choiseuil," I said. "I think he recognized us."

"I have met him," said Marie thoughtfully.

"Where did you meet him, Marie?"

"Oh he is a friend of the Grand Cuchess Vassili," she answered carelessly.

"Good night, Michael, farewell 'Night of Venice'. Remember England, Michael."

"I am longing for it."

"So am I, Michael. Good night, sweet player of lutes."

"Sleep well, little stealer of hearts," I replied.

Marie laughed and waved her hand. The gondola slid away.

I made up my mind I would see the Duc de Choiseuil in the morning, before I started for England. When I called at the Pallazzo del Avarro he was not at home.

* * * *

I had all the sensations of a happy schoolboy home for his holidays, a I wound round the English valley in my car. Watching with longing eyes until the first glimpse could be seen of the old octagonal bell tower rising from the centre of St. Freeda's Priory, with its pink and red bricks and lichened stone face glowing in the distance, breaking into mellowed lines over the trees.

Every tree and hedgerow, the spinny, my coppice and wood, all seemed to have burst into early summer leaf and blossom to greet me. I sniffed up the air greedily; it was like wine after the atmosphere of many foreign cities.

I was alone for once in a way, and could revel in my home and enjoy myself as I liked. Nicolo had been sent on from Venice to my villa at Portofino to pack up and forward to England, treasures of Italian and Spanish furniture and pictures, with which the place was overflowing. I wished to house all the possessions I loved best inside St. Freeda's.

Pomponard remained for some weeks upon the Continent arranging contracts for the next winter.

As I passed the gates of Castle-le-Sands, I noted with a thrill of joy that the big "To let" boards were down.

Yes, I should soon see Marie Zelovska, she was coming to the old dilapidated castle shortly. How bright and beautiful she would make it. I had never regarded the place with any interest before; now I watched the great grim structure until the trees hid it from view.

When we had entered the old stone archway at the edge of my grounds and wound up the broad pathway between the cedars and yew trees, I saw that several men were unloading cases before the porch of the Priory from a big furniture van.

"Hurrah!" I cried, "so Anton Vollmark has been as good as his word. Aladdin's treasures have arrived, and the Cave is waiting to receive them."

The gardener, together with one manservant, a fat woman presumably the cook, and a maid, all looking very perplexed and apparently counting all the huge packages over and over again, were grouped round the porch, seemingly without the least idea of telling the men what had to be done with them.

They greeted me shyly, but gladly, and seemed very relieved when I took charge of the proceedings. Taking off my coat and helping the men, as I did, and promising them both reward and refreshment, appealed to them much more than giving innumerable orders amidst the chaos.

I saw that everything was tenderly carried into the big Refectory which I used as the dining-room.

There I knew I could banish the servants, unpack at my leisure and enjoy unloadi g my treasures, one by one, until I decided how to arrange them.

It was twelve o'clock midday when we started; at length every package and case was inside. The beautiful old Refectory looked like a warehouse. I told all the men to go to the kitchen and have a good meal, and plenty of

beer. They filed out smacking their lips. I was indefatigable, no breaking off to eat or drink for me, I decided, until those cases had been opened.

It was whilst I was working alone before the wonderful old carved stone fireplace of the Refectory, which must have dated back at least to an early King Henry, that the strange thing happened which has always been one of the wonders of my life. I had possessed myself of one of the men's huge wooden mallets, and two solid iron wedges chiselled at the end, for prising open cases. These stout implements might well have been the joy and pride of any breaker-up of houses.

I hammered away with much strength and persistency to unloose a particularly stubborn board nailed down over one of the packing cases.

The last blow I dealt missed the iron wedge completely and the heavy mallet struck a corner of one of the embossed stone shields of the fireplace.

As my body followed the weight of the blow, I found myself nearly precipitated through an opening, and down two stone steps.

I recoiled in amazement.

My first astounding thought was that I had completely shattered one side of the fireplace.

Then I found I had discovered a hitherto unknown door, some hidden secret of the years long ago.

I stood dumb with astonishment and stared at the wide opening.

I was too surprised to credit the evidence of my own eyesight.

Yes, there it was, the great stone jamb of the fireplace high and very wide, one among the many beauties of the Priory, had revolved outwards and sideways, upon some sort of hidden axis.

Instantly I determined to explore and was seized with the excitement of adventure.

I grasped one of the big silver candelabra, lit the candles in it, and carefully went down two shallow stone steps. After proceeding eight paces, as a man would walk, upon a worn flat stone path, I was confronted with further shallow stone steps, ascending to a heavy oak door. Would it be open? What should I find?

I hesitated.

I lifted a heavy iron latch and pushed the oak door open.

Despite the great hanging cobwebs from the roof and the dust lying thickly everywhere, I felt as if I had suddenly stepped into some sealed-up place of the middle ages.

And so I had.

Through an oriel window of old and beautiful shape the sun flashed golden shafts against diamond lattice panes, dimly dusted with age. Across a band of old stained glass forming the top portion of the window, representing scenes and sacred figures, a mellower light scattered jewelled discs over parts of the ancient oak floor.

The glory of the newly discovered place was the roof. Never in England had I seen such work.

Angels and cherubims sculptured in oak with harps and scrolls, supported exquisitely carved corbels carrying flying buttresses, joining the arched central tie pieces, tier upon tier.

Cleaned and restored, it would be undoubtedly one of the loveliest rooms in the world.

The second room was through a stone archway and possessed a similar roof to that of the larger room. From a high carved projection upon the end wall, I judged it must have been used as a small private chapel or confessional.

What could this wonderful place have been? The answer seemed to come to me. It had been a carefully prepared hiding-place.

For whom?

The ages were silent concerning this. I did now know. The strange hiding place was devoid of a single piece of furniture or object of any sort which might have given a clue as to its former use.

"Only a perfect setting," I thought.

"What for, Michael?" I debated to myself.

"Why, your collection?"

I smiled, I had found the answer.

I crossed to the oriel window; after a little fumbling with rusty latches I found that two of the squares opened. Tendrils of jessamine and wild clematis, not yet in bloom, curled and pushed their way in, as if to welcome me.

I thought of the shallow stone steps.

Then this wondrous hidden place could not be very

high from the ground, sixteen or eighteen feet perhaps. Then I realized that the only thing that could be seen from the window was a distant dip in the woods, a long way off. I looked out of the window as far as I could.

Yes, it had indeed been a hiding place, and how cleverly it had been concealed. A bastion bulged out, artificially thickening one side of the octagonal tower. One of the old stone flying buttresses outside completely hid the window from beneath the Priory.

If a light were placed in the oriel window it could be seen only from the distant dip of the wood.

Had such a signal ever been given in the days gone by? Had this place been so used in the following of some forbidden cause; for the purposes of a forbidden religion, or for the pressing needs of some hidden love?

"Well, I have found a singular Aladdin's cave," I mused, "and a sort of Aladdin Chapel attached, provided that individual ever possessed such a thing."

I retraced my steps, ascertaining that a big iron knob worked the lever from the inside, and made my way into the Refectory, wondering how I was to close the great stone jamb of the fireplace again.

It was absurdly easy.

I pressed the embossed shield hard. The whole thing revolved again and closed.

Not a crack or a crevice could be seen where the sides joined, it only appeared to be solid stonework.

The men arrived back after their meal, unaware that I had been absent from the room. If they experienced any surprise at the little progress I had made they were tactful enough to conceal it.

"We will open all these cases for you, sir," the foreman suggested, "it will not take very long, and I do not think it is a job for your hand at all." Presumably the servants had been talking to the men about my vocation in life.

Undoubtedly that foreman was thoughtful to a degree that made him a king amongst workmen.

When at last everything was unpacked and it was all but impossible to move for wooden crates, sacking, bass, shavings, wrappers and empty crates, and I was all but in despair, this jewel among men made a proposition to me.

"It seems to me, sir, that you don't want this lovely

old room, which is, as I may say sir, one of the finest I have ever seen, littered up like this."

I waited wondering what he would think if he could see the two rooms I had just dicovered.

"Well, sir, I was thinking if you don't mind paying us for overtime, we will clear the whole lot of stuff away, take it back in the van with us. You see sir, all these things we have unpacked are uncommon beautiful things, I 'aint never 'andled none better, so if we cleared up for you, there would only be all them things to sort and arrange where you wants them to go."

I could have wept for joy. With unusual fervour I told him I would pay all of them handsomely.

In an incredibly short space of time all traces of the litter had been removed, the men had departed richly rewarded and extremely grateful. I gathered up a few remains of shavings and wrappers and threw them in the fireplace. Only pictures, silver, china, and furniture remained overflowing the room in disorder.

Locking the door of the Refectory behind me, I crossed the old paved corridor to the second big sitting-room.

Nicolo had grandly dubbed this "The Red Salon", presumably on account of its red silk curtains and window-seats, which in an ordinary way would have been called the drawing-room or music-room, since the grand piano resided there.

I was thinking hard and rang the bell. Nicolo had chosen all the servants of the place who were under him, the man-servant appeared at once.

"I will have dinner served here now."

"Very good sir, shall I set the round table for you?"

"Yes."

"I do not wish any of the servants to enter the Refectory Room, it is in great disorder. I have locked it temporarily."

"Very good, sir."

"After dinner send to the stables where the motor is kept, and ask for one of the back lamps of the car, filled ready for lighting."

"Bring it to you here, sir?"

"Yes."

I felt all the excitement of a conspirator in an old-time plot. I meant to place the lighted lamp in the oriel window of the newly-discovered room, with the red glass

facing the window. I knew I could pick out that red light far away in the wood.

As I consumed a most delightful dinner my thoughts were never absent from my new discovery. I was like a child with a new toy. The lovely hidden place I had found was a secret known at present only to myself. How delightful it would be to let it remain a secret.

Over a month before I played in public again. Nicolo away, Pomponard away. Then I smiled to myself at the thought of how I could dodge the long tirade upon my hopeless extravagance that I rather dreaded from Pomponard. The certainty of this recurred whenever I thought of the collection I had bought, the sum I had paid for it, and the manner in which I had acquired the money to buy such expensive luxuries.

I smiled when I told myself I would put the entire collection of rarities bought from Vollmark, inside the most perfect setting for it, in the whole house.

Pomponard need never know at all, or Nicolo either. Here I chuckled to myself; it was jolly and exciting to have a great secret like that all to myself.

I lighted a cigar and talked to myself. "Oh Michael, what a humbug you are. You mean to make those rooms, with their wonderful panelling and exaltingly beautiful roof, one of the most glorious sights in Europe solely to show to Marie. You mean to prepare it and show it to her, hoping and longing that it will be your bridal chamber. You mean to prepare something extraordinarily beautiful as a setting for her, who is all beauty herself.

"Isn't that the truth, Michael?"

"Yes."

Once more I sought the concealed rooms and placed the lighted lamp with its red ray before the oriel window. The place was dark and gloomy and struck me as with a sudden chill. I consoled myself with the thought that it would very shortly be exquisitely beautiful, and perfectly lighted at night whenever I desired it, with candles in old silver sconces, set in the panelled walls.

I didn't trouble to close the secret door since I had to return for the motor lamp. In my anxiety to reach the far dip in the woods I believe I even trod over flowerbeds and sometimes across rose trees not yet in bloom. For a long time I did not find what I had expected, or catch the faintest gleam of the light from the distant window.

At length I found that, from a little rising path in the woods, it could be distinguished, but only within a circle of about ten feet diameter stretched between the old trees. It merely looked like a faintly-lighted staircase window in the octagonal tower, and all trace of it vanished except from this one point. It will mean more workmen, alas! I sighed. I wended my way back to recapture the lamp.

I will wire to London for expert workmen to-morrow, all the carving in that room shall be thoroughly cleaned and restored. I will keep the key of the Refectory Room, and see that the servants are locked out of it.

A word of caution to the workmen and the secret is still mine.

"It is going to cost you something pretty stiff in the way of money, isn't it, Michael?"

"Yes rather, I should think it is."

"Let me see, old silver candle sconces for the walls, an early carved gilded wooden hanging candelabra to be suspended from one of the central beams. Persian rugs and tiger skins for the floor; oh, yes, and a costly triptych to go over the supposed altar in the inner room and make it complete."

"Anything else?"

"Heaps of other things to secure perfection, but the collection from Anton Vollmark will make sumptuous all the rest."

"Michael, you are absurdly happy aren't you?"

"Yes, and won't it be glorious when I lead Marie inside and show her the effect that art can accomplish? I can see the mellowed candle-lights now, shining upon the pictures, the narrow Charles table with its silver and Lowestoft bowls overflowing with flowers."

How stupid of me not to have thought of it before; of course those twelve long, narrow, old Flemish brackets, with their gamboge colour, and the polish of centuries upon them, with miracles carved underneath, of course I will hang the pictures resting upon their flat tops all round the room.

And the Duc D'Orleans resplendent couch-bed, how wonderful that can be made lying under the oriel window. Then I blushed. The woods were dark and fragrant, the moon was dipping a silver crescent shell behind the trees.

* * * *

The days were tumbling into weeks, the trees and hedgerows around St. Freeda's had shaken out the varied green treasures of their adornment.

Haunting perfumes of myriad flowers permeated the old Priory at every turn, and yet there was no Marie Zelovska to gladden me beyond all else, and make my life perfect.

My heart sank within me. Had she failed me after all? With a sickening sense of dread I remembered that I possessed no other means of meeting her, I knew of no address where she could be found.

The Grand Duchess Vassilli appeared to roam from city to city at the caprice of her own will.

Sometimes the thought would assail my mind that if they failed to come to Castle-le-Sands, I might never meet Marie again.

Every morning of my life I played my violin for two hours or more, often remembering the words Maurice Liebner had said to me. "Fortunately, Michael, you have done all your hardest practising and work as a boy. The rest of your life you will be able to keep your playing in a state of perfection with two hours a day, and do what would take many another artiste six or eight hours daily to accomplish."

Day by day, I wandered down the wood through the little bridle path, and climbed through the broken fence, dividing the grounds of St. Freeda's from Castle-le-Sands.

Eagerly each day I approached the house and scanned it anxiously for some outward appearance that might betoken their arrival, or any signal of habitation.

The doors remained locked, the windows shuttered, and never a wisp of smoke curled up from any of the high Gothic chimneys.

The special workmen I had engaged from London had finished their work upon the roof of the secret rooms. Despite the open lattices of the big oriel window, a smell of pine and resin, beeswax and turpentine, permeated the place, oddly mixed with the fragrance of clustered jessamine and wild clematis, trying their best to curl their way into the windows.

The men, under my direction, had moved all the treasures into "The Treasure Chamber", as I called it.

The resplendent couch-bed of the Duc D'Orleans had obstinately refused, for the space of three and a half hours

to pass the last door. Eventually persuasion, combined with the workmen's skill, had overcome its objections, or possibly a glimpse of the beauties beyond had appealed to its aristocratic imagination as being an appropriate resting-place for a renewed splendour of its life.

The wonderful old gamboge-coloured brackets, representing the miracles, were all fixed around the high walls, each one supporting a perfect painting hanging above them.

During my restlessness and anxiety, whilst waiting for Marie Zelovska, I had indulged in an orgy of reckless extravagance to make "The Treasure Chamber" perfect for her arrival.

I took long journeys in the car and nearly always returned laden with new spoils.

From London I had brought four magnificent old Flemish picture-tapestries. Their predominant colours of red and gold had taken my fancy.

In Gloucester I had discovered sixteen old carved wooden sconces that had once adorned some 15th century Italian cathedral. These carved sconces in ancient rosewood represented bishops, cardinals, saints, acolytes, all holding out golden crowns. The old golden crowns were the sockets for lighted candles.

It was a priceless find for such a room, and yet my passion for beautifying still continued unabated.

How recklessly I bought in those days everything rare and exquisite that appealed to me. I knew full well that each thing I had acquired was the result of knowledge and good judgement, and moreover that I possessed in these two rooms a fortune locked up in a bank, so to speak.

Still I was insatiable.

Old mulberry silk lattice curtains and hangings were added; with lion, tiger, and leopard-skins, for the floors.

Early English andirons for the old stone fireplace, old Spanish vermillion leather boxes to store the wood logs in for the fire.

I had ordered immense pillows of bronze-gold silk of special design, and snowy linen for the great couch-bed,

Last of all, the workmen suspended from the roof a coloured Venetian glass candelabra I had bought,

It was so vari-coloured in its blending lights, and of such ancient craftsmanship, that none could fix a date when it might have been blown.

I spread out the ancient and rare open needlework covering upon the couch-bed, flung some mulberry-coloured silk cushions into the Charles II chairs, set the Charles table with its silver of the period, and finally filled several cowls of old Bow and Lowestoft with flowers.

"The Treasure Chamber" was complete.

The head workman from London gazed admiringly around the room before leaving. His eyes regarded the roof, now a beautiful brown colour and richly shining; the walls with their pictures; the fireplace, the floor. He seemed to nod in an almost familiar way to all the carved wooden saints and angels.

"I think, sir," he said to me by way of a parting remark, "the hammer-beam roof over these rooms is the finest I have ever seen. It must be Henry IV, and I think myself it is finer than the roof of Westminster Hall. Anyway it is the very height of beauty in the Perpendicular style. I have never known more exquisite open-work tracery than these spandrels have between the braces. The carving of the corbels, of angels' heads, are perfect.

"I notice, sir, you have always locked the outside door of the Refectory Room, I suppose you want to keep this a secret chamber like it must have been in the days long ago."

"Yes, I want to keep it a secret, a surprise."

"I should think it might well be a great surprise to anyone, sir; it is the most beautiful place I have ever seen in my life. The works of art you have arranged so wonderfully in here, sir, must be worth a very big fortune."

"Yes," I agreed.

"Well, good-bye, sir, we have quite finished now and I will take my leave. Thank you very much for all you have done for us and for your handsome present. I think, sir, these apartments are fit for kings or princes, or a great National Museum. I do not know of another such apartment in the British Isles."

So the workmen left me.

I picked some sprays of jessamine and wild clematis at the window, and remembered that all my lavish and loving preparations were useless, for Marie was not here to share them with me, and enjoy the beauty of it all.

I sighed to myself ruefully, and then spoke my thoughts aloud, whimsically.

"Job is supposed to have had three comforters, and anyway, Michael, you have four, and very melodious ones at

that." So I took out my violins and played upon them one after the other.

They were Marie's gift, and they seemed to bring her nearer to me.

How gloriously mellow the Treasure House was with regard to sound; the violin seemed to soar upon wings to the very apex of the carved roof, the whole place throbbed in response to strings.

"A fair setting for music, the perfection of all sound," I muttered as I played on.

Not for long could I settle myself to play, I was restless, the whole place seemed charged with some fate that was closing in all around me.

I laid aside my violin. It was four o'clock in the afternoon.

I lit the great log fire to air the place, although it was summer.

I resolved I would go and gather strawberries, that were then sheltering their red lusciousness beneath the cool green leaves, rows upon rows of them, within the crumbling red walls of the kitchen garden. The gardener assisted me in picking a large basket heaped full. The old fellow waxed eloquent concerning the roses and flowers, fruits, and vegetables of St. Freeda's.

Suddenly he gave me a sort of galvanic shock which could hardly have been improved upon, had he delivered it from a fully charged electric battery.

"Come through the coppice just now, sir, and by the little brook at the foot of it, a young lady was sitting, sir."

"Young lady? What sort of young lady?"

"A very beautiful young lady, sir, dark, and she had great dark eyes, sir, and she looks hard at me and I didn't like to tell her she was trespassing."

I seized the basket of strawberries and fled.

"Chattering old fool," I cried, " and he dares to babble endlessly of vegetables, whilst Marie is actually waiting for me."

I sped down the woods.

A little figure in gold-brown corduroy velvet sat quietly with folded hands.

She had nestled against a tree, and was watching the brook.

I crept up behind her.

"Do you know you are trespassing," I observed.

"Then take me into custody," she retorted.

I did, for I folded her tightly in my arms whilst she laughed at me and kissed me.

"Marie, darling, where have you been all these weeks; I have waited and waited and——"

"I have been in great danger, Michael."

"Marie! danger?— You?—danger of what?"

"Oh! many things, Michael."

"But, Marie, you must tell me."

"Yes, I am going to do so now. Can we go up to the Priory, somewhere quite quiet, where we shall be undisturbed and I can talk to you?"

"Of course, there is nobody in the house but myself, and a few servants."

"Let us go there now, Michael.

"Michael, dear, what a heavenly wilderness of flowers you have here."

I stood still suddenly in the path between two of the fragrant wildernesses mentioned.

"Marie," I declared reproachfully, "you surely haven't travelled all these hundreds of miles to talk about the garden."

She laughed gaily and stretched out one of her little gloved hands, in an appealing foreign fashion, characteristic of her.

"Silly boy," she said, "you will have quite enough to hear later on, without my commencing the harrowing narrative now."

The servants brought tea into the Refectory Room. Marie removed her gloves and presided over what was to me an enchanted meal.

I noticed that she had one or two costly rings upon her dimpled, ivory-white hands. She was wearing the necklace I had given her; it glinted below her outer coat. The sapphires seemed to flash blue and violet lights, just as if they were reflecting the dancing violet lights of her own eyes.

When the servants had departed, Marie glanced round the room, almost lovingly, I thought.

"Michael, what a gloriously appointed place? I had no idea you were such a connoisseur."

"You like it Marie? Wait until I have shown you two apartments you haven't seen yet."

"But surely Michael, you have taken me through all the sitting-rooms in the Priory."

I shook my head and laughed gleefully.

"Keeping the most wonderful to the end, Michael?"

I nodded.

"I don't wonder you love St. Freeda's, Michael."

"I want you to love it also, Marie."

"Your wish is granted then, for I do.

"Michael surely that basket upon the table, the one holding the strawberries, is solid gold."

"Yes, the Czar and Czarina of Russia sent it to me."

Marie shivered slightly.

"So one feels the shadow of their influence even here," she said.

"Those other old silver filigree baskets, Michael, are they presents from Royalty too?"

"Yes, one from Italy, the other from Denmark."

"Why do they all send you cake baskets, Michael?" she enquired mischievously.

"Oh I suppose they think I like cake."

"And do you?"

"No, hate it," I confessed.

Marie laughed. "Michael, how funny you are? Of course all these really wonderful pictures and the old furniture you bought and chose yourself."

"Yes; ah, but Marie, wait until you see the holy of holies I have prepared especially for your delight."

"Michael, if you don't take me there at once I shall not believe there is such a place. I refuse to have my curiosity played upon like this."

"Wait until the servants have cleared away tea. They do not know of its existence."

"Michael, what do you mean?"

"I have accidentally stumbled upon two secret rooms in this old Priory, so artfully concealed that nobody would ever dream of their existence. Nobody in the world save myself and a few workmen who have now departed to London, even know there is such a place here; I think it must have once been the hiding-place of some king, or perhaps queen."

"Very likely it once sheltered some great Prince of the Church, at the time when religious beliefs were dangerous things to indulge in without losing one's head in a very literal sense."

"Michael, how exciting! show me!"

The servants entered and took away tea. I ordered dinner to be laid for two in the Red Salon.

After a while I carefully locked the Refectory Room door.

"Why do you do that, Michael?"

"The concealed rooms lead out of this room, Marie."

Marie Zelovska glanced all around her bewildered and almost incredulous.

"Now where do you suppose the hidden rooms are, little one?"

"Don't tease me any more, Michael."

* * * *

When I first led Marie into "The Treasure Chamber", she had given a little gasp of unrestrained wonder and delight.

The oriel windows were open. Sunlight, pouring through stained glass, was flinging a lattice pattern of red and blue and gold upon the floor.

Some logs still crackled and glowed in the great stone fireplace.

With her eyes wide open, Marie had taken in all the glorious beauty of the place.

Then she closed her eyes, and her hands were outstretched, as if she had at last come home to enter upon some frequent and dearly cherished vision, seen only before within the vagueness of a dream.

"Michael, how exquisitely beautiful?"

She was silent for a long time, then she added, "and safe beyond all power of discovery.

"Why, it might have been placed here on purpose to shelter me; a way of escape."

"Marie, dearest love of mine, tell me now at once, what is it that you fear? What do you want to escape from? Not a soul, nor any combination of circumstances can hurt you or harm you whilst I am here with you. Tell me, Marie, what is it?"

She shook her head. "Time enough later on, Michael."

She laid her hand upon my mouth to stop any further expostulation upon my part.

"Show me all the pictures, Michael, let me revel in them and the silks and tapestries, all these superb

carvings, and the lovely old china and silver and glass."

She buried her face in a huge Lowestoft bowl of amber Gloire de Dijon roses, and pressed her soft red mouth upon them. Gaily she talked of everything and every subject except herself, which was the only thing I was most longing to hear about.

She had removed her hat and outer coat, and all through dinner the roguish face sparkled. Her dark curls framed the perfect head.

No one would ever dream she had a thought or a care in the world beyond making radiant the immediate present, which she did for me.

I looked at her and adored her.

We lingered over the coffee and liqueurs.

We were alone when I lit her cigarette for her, and bending over her, shamelessly stole more kisses.

For once she did not respond to my caresses, or so it seemed to me. She caught up the big golden basket of strawberries and lightly swung it off the table.

"Shall we finish dessert in 'The Treasure Chamber', Michael? Come, it is the after-dinner hour of confession, and surely the place could not be more appropriate, for it is, indeed, a glorified private chapel."

Gaily I led the way and, taking the strawberries from her, I crushed one of the firm red berries against her little red mouth.

She pretended she wouldn't eat it.

"They are both the same colour," I declared.

"No reason why I should be forcibly fed after a good dinner, Michael." Then she tilted her head back.

"All right, feed me, Michael," she smiled.

Inside "The Treasure Chamber" she wandered across to the old window-seat. The late evening light was still filtering through in mellowed golden shafts.

"Michael, I have deceived you, and oh! I am very sorry for it now. I shall have to begin from the very beginning and tell you all the truth.

"I deceived you for two reasons, one was simply a woman's pique, because you hadn't remembered me; the other because I wanted to find out if you cared for me for myself alone, as a woman who seemed nothing particular in the world and who was only a companion. Boy, Boy!" she continued, and there was a little throb of emotion in her voice, "I have loved you and loved

you, and adored you ever since you were a little boy of twelve. Yes, loved you from the moment when as a little girl I wanted to kiss you in the salon in Paris, since the night we were in the Duchesse D'Auvergne's box at the Grand Opera. I had never forgotten you, but you had never even given another thought to me."

"But Marie, I never saw you in my life before I met you that wonderful afternoon at Vollmark's in Dresden."

Marie gently crossed the room to where a little miniature was hanging and took it tenderly in her hands and kissed it. Her quick eyes must have seen it although I had hung it up for the first time since the Painter had painted it for me.

She held the wonderfully painted little "Ishmael in the Wilderness".

Marie lifted up her face to me, as she whispered, "I can kiss the original now.

"Michael, I am the Princess Marie Zelovska Idourska.

"I told you I was in danger. I am in great danger, Michael.

"I am under age.

"I am formally betrothed to my cousin, Prince Paul Alexis Idourska, whom I loathe and hate.

"I will kill myself before I marry him or permit him to even touch me.

"His life has been vile and unutterable, he is a bully, a blackguard, and I believe in my inmost heart, a coward.

"If great White Russia, enduring, patient, and downtrodden, ever rises in blood and red revolt, it will be because such people as Prince Paul Alexis exist.

"He and my uncle, Prince Dmetri, who is also appointed a guardian over me (together with the Czar), have existed to torture and suppress, flog, and imprison those over whom they are placed in charge and over whom they rule.

"Listen, Michael, I only settled to take Castle-le-Sands from your description of it in Vollmark's salon.

"I forbade Vollmark to tell you who I really was when I knew you did not recognize me.

"There was only one way of securing Castle-le-Sands; that was to buy it; I did so through agents. It was, as you know, a big price, coming upon the top of the price I paid for those violins, which I had determined you should possess.

"Rich as I am, such sums withdrawn from my banking account would have excited instant comment and attention. That is why I gave the necklace in exchange for them."

"But, Marie, darling Marie, why didn't you tell me?"

"Let me finish, Michael. Something or someone must have aroused suspicion about my movements.

"The powerful Secret Service of Russia, and there is none more powerful or terrible in the world, was set in motion to watch me.

"You know why I went to Venice, because of that newspaper paragraph about Rosa Baumer. I should never have gone.

"The young Duc de Choiseuil proposed to me, wanted to marry me.

"At first he was bitter and enraged against you because he thought you had deceived him, when you had told him you did not know me.

"That is why he would not see you when you called.

"I put that right; he knows now, knows everything, Michael. He is a great gentleman. He warned me that the secret police were following me.

"It was owing to his anxiety for me, although he knew his own suit was hopeless, that I had to lie in wait hidden before I could come to Castle-le-Sands. It was through the Duc de Choiseuil that I got to England alone, except for one devoted old woman, my nurse, Katrinka, and a faithful old Cossack, Ivan, who has carried me in his arms as a child."

"But, Marie, isn't the Grand Duchess Vassilli with you at Castle-le-Sands?"

Marie shook her head.

"No, Michael, only myself, Katrinka, and Ivan; only four of the rooms there are furnished.

"Yesterday, two members of the Russian secret police were seen in the lane, and they even tried to effect an entrance into the house.

"You don't know Russia, Michael; remember I am a Princess nearly related to the Royal House.

"The Court etiquette in St. Petersburg is the strictest in the world.

"They cannot compel me to marry Prince Paul Alexis, but they can imprison me, confiscate my titles, together with all my money and estates, if I marry without the

Imperial consent, also the consent of Prince Dmetri, my uncle.

"Then, Michael, to-day the real danger I have dreaded, occurred. Prince Paul Alexis himself came to Castle-le-Sands and demanded to be taken over the house, to see for himself if I was there.

"Ivan refused him admittance, saying that only two servants were there at the present time, and obeying my orders to them, declared that I was away visiting friends in a distant part of England.

"Paul Alexis refused to believe it and promised Ivan the most awful tortures and death when he could get him back again in his own country. Ivan never faltered, for he is loyal. Paul Alexis, with his bullet head and his shifting, snake-like eyes, that never look anyone straight in the face, is mad for me because he knows he will never get me. He will stop at nothing because he is beginning to realize that I am beyond his reach.

"At any moment, now he thinks he has tracked me down, he may appear in the grounds of Castle-le-Sands, or the grounds of St. Freeda's here, and try to seize and take me away.

"Michael, I am afraid of him.

"I want your protection, Michael. I have given up everything for you, risked all for you; let me stay here, Michael."

"Marie, darling heart, listen to me. What does it matter about your Russian title, lands, money, anything. Marry me and I will give you everything you want, beloved. When we are wed, I will love and adore you as I do now.

"What power could any of these titled people have over either of us if you married me?

"Yes, little belovedest, you shall wed me here as soon as it can be arranged with bell, book, and candle, also a priest."

She stretched out her little arms until they met around my neck.

Stray perfumed blossoms of the white starry jessamine clustering in the window peeped a loving background around her dark curls.

There was a little sob in her voice, as she whispered: "Michael, you will be the only priest present here to-night."

* * * *

Through the lattice windows of "The Treasure Chamber" shot the delicate arrows of dawn, pink as a flamingo's wings, mingled with streaks of marigold. Thrushes and many birds trilled their early morning notes.

Within my own heart there was a wild tumultuous choiring of life and love. The beauty of holiness mingling with the throbbing of passion seemed to resolve into all the harmonies that had ever resounded in the spheres to beguile the senses.

A Treasure Chamber indeed, for it held the most sacred treasure in the world for me, and withal the loveliest one. Some strange incense as of rarest nard flung its perfume over everything, so that was only an imagination exalted beyond its usual dreams.

Through the open windows were wafted fragrant remembrances of wild clematis, jessamine and wild thyme.

Tenderly, as if afraid to disturb their nestling beauty, I lifted the dark curls from her forehead, as she lay sleeping and shrouded beneath the old needlework covering.

As I gazed at her, holding her as I did hallowed within my eyes and in my heart, the words of Paul Verlaine swept upward across my brain, swift as the flight of a swallow. Words that were written in gold beneath one of the pictures in this very room:

> "And my weaned mouth along her white hand slips
> No flowers have scent like that the first ones hold
> No sounds have such sweet stress as those that haunt
> The first heard 'yes' from the beloved lips."

"Marie! Marie!" I called to her rapturously, "Marie, Princess of all the world, how beautiful you are?"

She opened her eyes,

"Oh, Michael!" she said reproachfully, "did you wake me just to tell me that?"

So the Princess became a willing prisoner within what for both of us was an enchanted castle. When we breakfasted, or lunched, or dined together, the servants only believed she had wandered in through the grounds from Castle-le-Sands.

Every day she went to see her old nurse Katrinka, during which excursions she procured all the various changes of costume and the many things of raiment dear to the heart of a woman, but I was always in close attendance.

We never visited Castle-le-Sands until after nightfall, when we slipped in through the broken palings of the bridle path between the adjoining grounds of our houses.

I was soon to discover that Marie's fears were by no means groundless.

One evening, some hours after we had finished dinner. Marie kept me playing the violin to her. I had scored and completed "Night in Venice" and she loved it, I think, more than anything I played to her.

"It is heavenly, Michael, just some of our two lives, our own romance, our hour of love, Michael."

Then a serious look came into her great deep eyes, and she asked me to play her "Hymning Choirs of Angels" as she called it.

"You mean Liebner's setting of Schubert's 'Ave Maria'."

"Yes, Michael, play that to make me feel good, for oh! Michael, I have been very, very wicked."

I pretended to balance my violin bow upon her little straight nose. "It won't balance," I declared, "your nose is too classical for tricks, Marie."

"Michael darling, don't be so ridiculous, play me what I asked you at once."

"Not until you say that you are not wicked."

"But I am, Michael; sometimes I wonder if I shall ever be forgiven. When you play 'Ave Maria', as you alone can play it, it seems to engulf me in a flood, like a Benediction, and it is my very soul you are soothing.

"A soul that has sinned as I have sinned does need soothing, and oh, lots of forgiveness, don't you think, Michael?"

"Marie, I won't let you talk like this; if anybody has been a sinner and a blackguard, assuredly I have been one."

"Michael, you shall not use that word with regard to yourself. . . . There is only one man," she added thoughtfully, "that I could apply that term to: I mean the man who intends to marry me, if he can, by fair means or by foul, Prince Paul Alexis."

"Little Marie," I pleaded, "my only means of salvation also is to marry you, to wipe away the most glorious, and yet the greatest reproach of my life."

"I shall always love you before and above all men, Michael, but I shall never be able to marry you."

"Marie, I beg of you, I implore you."

She shook her head.

It must have been after twelve o'clock at night when I discovered I had neglected not only to provide "The Treasure Chamber" with sufficient cigarettes, but had entirely forgotten the spirit tantalus, soda water, and even the light white wine that Marie usually drank.

I promptly made for the Refectory Room, to repair my many omissions. The wide stone slab swung noiselessly back. I entered from the darkness of the hidden stone passage because I had become accustomed to go into the room without a light. Objects could be dimly distinguished owing to the summer moon shining in from the top of the high windows. I paused suddenly, quite silent, but not unamazed, to see the outline of a tall, powerful man disappearing through the end of the Refectory Room. He was going noiselessly into the upstairs rooms of the Priory.

I closed the secret door and awaited his return, beside a cabinet that cast one of the blackest shadows in the room.

An open window at the end of the room clearly indicated his means of entrance, and possibly exit; I would wait.

Yes, Marie had been right: one of these Russian Secret Police; moreover, creeping about my house at night; I determined to shake him up in no particularly gentle manner.

The fellow was away some time; he was examining, I felt convinced, the bedrooms and guest-rooms that ran round the old gallery upon the first floor.

Lightly as he walked, and stealthily as he trod, I heard him approach the Refectory Room, where I was concealed. A bulky form hardly more distinguishable than a black shadow had advanced a little way across the room.

I sprang upon him so silently, so swiftly, he must have experienced one of the shocks of his life. I caught his wrists and pinioned them behind him. He struggled and fought with all his strength for many minutes.

Not a word or exclamation passed his lips, only his breathing grew heavier and more laboured. He tried to trick me in the darkness, and trip me with his feet. I bent his wrists further inwards with a grip like iron; he must have felt that his bones were upon the point of breaking.

He groaned deeply, and remained still.

I did not release my hold, but propelled him towards an electric light switch. With my hands still upon his wrists, which by now he was scarcely able to move, I made his hand turn up the electric light switch.

As the light flooded the room I let go my hold and viewed the man facing me.

Tall as myself, and powerful, but possessing a bull head and neck, he had shifting eyes of the reptile order; the comparison becoming all the more marked since they were now shooting out sparks of ungovernable rage and hate.

His face appeared scarlet and bloodshot, possibly owing to his late exertions.

He was the first to speak, being forced to do so since my attitude of silence rendered me master of the situation, coldly awaiting some sort of explanation.

He spoke with a marked accent, but in otherwise good English. "So—the handsome and much worshipped fiddler—not she who I am searching for."

"Of what nature can your search be, since it precludes the possibility of your ringing or knocking at the front entrance of St. Freeda's Priory, in preference to breaking in during the dead of night like a common thief."

My words must have lashed him like a whip. He sprang towards me with uplifted hands, as if he wanted to strike me.

I remained exactly where I was.

"You know I am no common thief."

"I have no evidence to the contrary."

"If we were in Russia, or upon the Continent, I would make you pay for that insult."

"Agreed, but why wait for either Russia or the Continent or some other place unable to accomodate us for the moment."

I opened the doors of one of the high Tudor cabinets almost facing him. A glittering row of swords, rapiers, and foils were displayed.

They were one of the joys of Pomponard's heart, and many a bout we had enjoyed in the old Refectory Room.

With one hand I pushed back the long and heavy old Refectory table in the centre of the room. Perhaps something in my action or possibly the workman-like look and condition of the collection of swords made him hesitate, which he did very perceptibly.

By way of determining not to spare any fragment that might have remained of his self-respect, I took the small framed parchment scroll with its gold disc placed over the old stone chimney shelf, proclaiming me the winner of the open challenge at the Salle des Armes d' Aremo for sword, rapier and foils.

To anyone who knew, it proclaimed something more; it told them without words that I must be among the first six or eight best swordsmen of Europe.

He looked at it and handed it back without a word. He made no effort to speak, or to do anything.

I was quite unable to keep the obvious sneer either out of my voice or my words.

"I must consider myself trebly unfortunate," I observed. "An ideal place, the absence of which you lately commented upon, does not meet with your approval. A foeman surely worthy of your steel, who even does not take the disadvantage of withholding from you his credentials, yet still it lacks your approbation.

"Moreover, up to the present I have waited patiently for some sort of apology from you, or should you find that impossible, at least an explanation of your uninvited presence in my house after midnight."

"I will give you no explanation—it is unnecessary in my position that I should do so."

"Your position at the present moment is a very awkward, not to say invidious, one. May I remind you that you are not in Russia."

"Ah!—so you know me."

"Thank God, no, I have been spared that degradation, but I know all that your rotten name and title stands for. Now listen to me."

He saw that I was in a white heat of passion, and as I swiftly advanced to him he only retreated in the sort of attitude of some large animal crouching, yet about to spring.

"You may think you can bully and persecute helpless women, but you won't bully me, and you are too much of a coward to fight me, for I offered you the chance.

"Failing these things you will perhaps attempt to invoke the aid of your Imperial Master. Glance round the room, you will see several tributes of his personal friendship for me. He is at least a Royal gentleman. You could no more overcome me in Russia than you can here.

"Within every city in that land I am an honoured friend that the people flock to meet, whilst every city upon the Continent you will find the same.

"At the earliest hour to-morrow morning I inform the Gloucestershire police that an undesirable Russian Prince, and two other Secret Service Russian Police, are breaking into and entering houses within the district. Unless you clear out of the place at once, I issue orders for your arrest."

"And is that all?" he sneered.

"Oh! no! If ever you attempt to molest, worry, or harm in any way the Princess Marie Idourska——"

"Ah! at last," he snarled, then he sprang at me.

My hands, which are by no means as delicate as they look, closed round his throat and I shook him. He knew I was in the mood to kill him. I let him wrench himself free, and he stood there panting, beaten, yet defiant, looking like some defeated devil striving to beat his way out of hell.

"Remember my words well; attempt to do any of these things to her, and I will kill you without any compunction; any city will be equally convenient, and the means of putting an end to you immaterial. But I shall do it."

With a sort of snarl, strangely suggestive of a caged animal, he was making his way to the open window from which he had entered, when I called him back.

"I should prefer that you took your long delayed departure by way of the front entrance. I will accompany you."

"I know the way," he retorted.

"Obviously, but my guidance through the grounds will ensure a not unnecessary delay in your departure."

When we reached the old stone arched gateway at the edge of the grounds, he paused and spoke.

"I am at a disadvantage to-night; some day I shall meet you when the advantage will be upon my side, that will perhaps be something worth thinking over."

"You will always be at a disadvantage, I should imagine," I answered coldly. "You have the singular misfortune of lacking all personal courage together with the elementary instincts of a gentleman. To render the combination more remarkable, you are unpossessed of a rudimentary sense of honour, or even humour."

He strode out of the gateway into the lane without making any reply.

When I re-closed the secret door and re-entered "The Treasure Chamber", I found Marie deeply agitated. Her eyes shone wild and were dilated as if from some unknown terror, her face was deadly white.

She tottered across to me and flung her arms round my neck.

"Oh Michael! Michael! something has happened, why didn't you come back to me? I thought the hidden door wouldn't work and that you couldn't get to me. Oh Michael, I thought I might be shut up here alone, helpless—don't you understand, if anything had happened to you nobody would know. I simply couldn't bear the thought of it, the horror. I think I knew what great fear was for the first time.

"My hands seemed paralysed with fear. I couldn't even try the door in case I couldn't open it, as I feared."

I kissed her, holding her close to me, then I poured some wine out and made her drink it.

"Something did happen, Marie. As I entered the Refectory Room through the secret passage, Prince Paul Alexis was upon the point of vanishing through the end door, apparently bent upon a tour of inspection of the upstairs rooms."

Marie just caught her breath sharply; her dark eyes never left my face.

"So the danger was as real as I thought," she said, "only even nearer than I supposed."

"I don't think, belovedest, you will be troubled any further by either Prince Paul or his spies."

"What happened, Michael?"

"Oh, a lot of things."

"You won't tell me?"

"There is no need, little one. I escorted him out of the grounds, which neither he nor his Russian spies will ever enter again. We are rid of them all for good, and shall be able to roam about joyously whenever we like without the least chance of meeting them."

"Michael, that is not all?"

"No, not quite all. I had the honour of informing Prince Paul Alexis that I would kill him without the faintest compunction if he ever annoyed or attempted to molest you."

"Oh Michael, I hate him. Why didn't you kill him?"

"Well, it would have been rather difficult to explain without involving your name, wouldn't it, sweetheart?"

She nodded, then throwing back her glorious little head, with dark wonderful eyes, she smiled up at me.

"Michael, I'm a little barbarian and quite bloodthirsty, don't you think?"

"Yes," I agreed "but also unimaginably lovable. Would you ever suggest killing me in that calm way?" I queried.

"Yes, if you ever loved another woman more than myself,"

"Oh thanks, then I shall have quite a good chance of continuing a happy existence, the contingency you mention being impossible."

"Boy, you haven't seen all the women of the world. You don't know."

"Yes I do, I have seen them all in you."

All that night she lay in my arms, her love, her sense of being protected, her gratitude, all blended into a kind of adoration, were expressed for me.

"We may not have long together, Michael, joy of my heart," she whispered to me, "and we must not even count the priceless hours lest they seem to fly too quickly.

"Michael?"

"Yes."

"Do you love me more than anything else in the whole world."

"Yes."

"More than your art?"

"Above and beyond anything in this world or the next, more than life, more than God."

"Hush, Michael dear, you must not say that."

* * * *

It was dawn, and we awoke in sudden terror, to a horrible booming as of a giant gong being struck; the very foundations of "The Treasure Chamber" were rocking and shaking as with an earthquake.

"Michael! Michael! what is it, what was that awful sound? Why are you looking terrified, Michael?—oh I'm terrified myself. What has happened, Michael? Don't look at me like that; for God's sake speak to me."

I shuddered and crossed over to the big stone fireplace, and placed my head against the great stone arch, it seemed as hot as my own throbbing, startled head.

Yes, yes, of course, the log fire was still burning faintly. I kicked it into a blaze. After that effort I felt paralysed.

Marie came across to me.

"The blow has fallen," I cried.

"Michael, what blow? Tell me, tell me; oh, don't look like that, Michael. I can't bear it."

"Maliol has appeared to me for the last time."

"Who is Maliol? I don't understand."

"Marie, don't speak to me, don't touch me, don't ask me. The curse has come about. Yes," I cried wildly, "he cursed me. I have failed in my oath; everything will be taken away from me.

"That awful gong we heard, and it was intended we should both hear it, sounded before he went away for the last time. He departed for ever to another world where I cannot follow, perhaps a hell of devils and demons for aught I know, but I am to remain here on earth to be tortured. Oh, my God! he has taken away my gift. What shall I become?

"It is too late now, I cannot alter it. What shall I do? I shall no longer be able to play."

Marie crossed swiftly to the spirit tantalus and poured out half a tumbler of neat brandy. "Drink this, Michael."

My hand shook as I held the glass. I drank it off and pushed the glass aside. I was shaking as with ague.

Gently she led me to the great oak chair beside the fireplace. She knelt beside me chafing my hands, hovering about me as a mother might do with a dearly-loved child who had been suddenly smitten with some strange illness.

"Michael," she asked at length, "are you yourself again?"

"Yes, as much as I shall ever be."

"Are you suffering from some strange, dreadful dream, some hallucination, or what is it, Michael dear? Just tell me everything. Whatever it is, you have experienced some great shock."

"Yes, a great shock."

"Tell me."

"It first happened to me when I was a child."

"What happened, Michael?"

"A being, a spirit, an apparition, I don't know how to classify it, appeared to me first when I was a child."

"Yes, dearest, yes."

"He seemed to be as an angel, a god of music, I understood his name was Maliol, he promised me unlimited power beyond all my fellows over music and the art of it."

"In a dream only, Michael?"

"No it was all as real as you are now. Those strange violin pieces, 'The Forbidden Dance of the Elves,' 'Papillions,' were all heard from Maliol, inspired by him, given to me. "All given to me upon one condition."

"Condition, Michael?"

"Yes, that I never loved anyone or anything upon earth so well as my art and the music he had empowered me to produce. One solemn night he appeared to me and made me take an awful oath."

"That you would never love anything or anyone more than your art, Michael?"

"Yes."

"And you have?"

"Yes."

"So to-night, Michael, you again had a vision of this—spirit or devil, for it could only have been a devil, if he placed aught above love.

"Remember, Michael dear, I am a Catholic and believe, although angels may be round us they are never actually permitted to reveal themselves to us. Visions and spirits that appear are more likely to be only those of evil; but tell me what occurred as you were enabled to see it in a dream, for it could only have been a dream."

"It was no dream, Marie, it was reality. Maliol appeared to me, his face had changed, it was terrible to behold. He bade me choose between my oath to music and yourself. I said, you went hand in hand, I loved you both so.

"He said the one word, '*Choose*'."

"Yes, Michael?"

"Before I seemed to have the power to reply to him he said, 'What of the fair young maid you have brought to shame?' I felt aroused in all my being, and declared to him that it was no shame, we loved each other so."

Very softly Marie lifted my hand and kissed it. "Yes, Michael," she said, "and then?"

"Marie, oh Marie, he told me I had broken my most solemn oath, that all my gift and the power of it would be taken away from me in a manner I knew not of; that my punishment would be greater than I could bear.

"He placed his hand upon the magic stone I always wear. As he touched it he said he would take away its virtue.

"That awful gong sounded as he vanished from my sight for ever, but his curse will be accomplished."

"What magic stone, Michael?"

Silently I took it from around my neck where it was still suspended but hidden, hanging upon the length of the catgut E string, to which I had threaded it years before.

Marie gazed at it as if stupefied. "But Michael, what is this stone, and where did it come from?"

"Maliol declared he would send it to me by an earthly messenger."

"Yes, Michael."

"He did so, and by means of a terrible looking sailor, who did not look as if he were of this earth; that was years ago in Marseilles."

"But what is it? What power is it supposed to have?"

"None now, but it is the magic jewel that gained me the gold medal at Warsaw; the hidden thing always about me that enabled me to play the violin differently to anyone else in the world."

"You believe that, Michael?"

"Of course, I know it."

Marie rose abruptly to her feet. "Michael, bring your violin here and play it."

"No! No! No!"

"Michael, what do you mean?"

"I daren't try; perhaps I couldn't play any more at all: no, anything but that. I daren't put it to the test. I am terrified, yes, terrified."

Something of the terror that was consuming me seemed to communicate itself to Marie. Her eyes, as she looked at me speechlessly, seemed also to reflect an unknown horror.

Daylight was flooding the room, and we stood white-faced and silent before each other.

Neither of us dared or even desired to make an advance of love, nor did our white lips even seek the solace of a kiss.

A mysterious blight had fallen upon our Eden. "The Treasure Chamber" looked like a costly sepulchre.

The woven fan-shaped spandrels of the roof only appeared to hang above us like great spiders' webs, ready to fall and enmesh us in a network of clinging dust. The lovely carven, life-like heads of cherubim and seraphim seemed to leer like mocking demons.

The richly decorated couch of the Duc D' Orleans had become a sarcophagus and I had the bitterness of knowing I had made it such.

* * * *

The little Princess remained as silent as myself. She was thinking hard, her clever brain working in the endeavour to sort facts from phantasies. Separating, as far as she was able, the real from the unreal, trying her best to reconcile an unknown, unearthly atmosphere, to an earthly focus.

With all a clever woman's intuition she was grappling at the problem how to recover the reins of sanity, and hold them within hand. Desperate, yet numbed as I was feeling, her first words gave me a sort of added electric shock.

"You remember, Michael, that this very night about nine o'clock, you have to play at the big concert in the famous Midland town."

A shuddering feeling of sickness swept over me, as I realized what she said was true.

"Impossible; no, no. I shall wire to Pomponard that I am too ill to play."

"Michael dear, listen to me: that is impossible. You are the servant of the public, you cannot disappoint them. You must not, shall not, ruin your name like that. Pomponard has come straight from the Continent for this concert. As your business man, he will refuse to believe in such a sudden illness, knowing you to be well.

"The public will also refuse to believe it. Some thousands of them saw you well and happy and triumphant at the Queen's Hall, only a few days ago, and heard you play."

"A few days ago," I muttered bitterly, "Maliol hadn't taken away my gift from me."

The little Princess stamped her foot, her eyes showed unusual sparks, as of one stirred to sudden battle.

"I will not believe it, Michael, be he devil or angel,

he cannot do it, I tell you. . . . No power we know of can rob an artiste of the technique, the art of a lifetime. What is paralysing you is an effect upon the mind, brought about by some strange visions which have intimidated you. These have temporarily wrecked your mind, but they have not, and shall not, permanently ruin your nerves, your judgement and sense of proportion, if I can prevail upon you to listen to me and believe me."

Then for the first time, that I had known, in her life, the little Princess began to cry.

I soothed her as best I could, yet I felt too utterly dejected myself to attempt ought in the way of comfort. . . . Between her sobs she told me many things. "You see, Michael dear, it is a strange story. Some of its horror has affected me I suppose, but oh, Michael! I seem somehow utterly helpless to do anything for you. I—I have never known a great artiste before, or been constantly with them. I have never really realized their inner feelings or thoughts —how could I?—so I cannot share all yours either, Michael, much as I love you.

"Of course I knew that all greatly gifted ones have their moments of abject horror, maddening terror, as well as their exalted heights.

"Michael, I beg of you not to fail; go to the concert dearest one, play as you have always played. Promise me, Michael, promise me!"

She was crying bitterly, and whatever was in store for me, I had to stop that. I would not willingly have caused her to shed one bright tear.

"Yes, yes, I will go, Marie, but if I find what I fear is true, I shall have to cancel the concert before it starts. I cannot be disgraced for ever in public."

"You will go, Michael? You will try for my sake?"

"Yes."

"Let me get your violin?"

I felt the room go round and round about me, a deadly sickness seemed to be upon me.

"No—No—Marie."

She took my hands, the hands I somehow dreaded might one day refuse ever to play again. Marie read my deep agitation aright.

Stroking my hands within her own, she went on speaking soothingly to me.

"Order your car very early, Michael, so that for once,

instead of arriving at the last minute, you will get to the concert-hall some two or three hours before the concert starts."

"Well?"

"See Pomponard directly you arrive, and get him to accompany you in several pieces."

"And then?"

"Why, dearest one, your nerves will have regained all their powers, your hands will no longer be icy cold and inert, as they are now.

"Michael, I have never known you to be in fear of anything in your life. You are only so now because something unearthly, unnatural and incomprehensible, beyond the ordinary, has somehow come into your life and dominated your brain, to the momentary exclusion of everything else. It will pass, Michael; I know it. Let's me come with you in the car, Michael?"

"No—I couldn't bear that."

"You will take my advice?"

"Yes, so far, but I—I don't want anyone I know and love to witness——"

"Yes, yes. You will travel back here after the concert through the night?"

I nodded.

"Then I shall be waiting here to welcome you.

"I shall go to Castle-le-Sands and return here before you come back, I shall be present to hear you have triumphed, that you are the incomparable Michael I have always known.

"My love will be here awaiting you, I shall be holding my unshattered belief in you, as it was of old, as it will be for ever."

* * * *

When I arrived at the great Midland town, Pomponard's face, when he saw me, was a study. For once in his life he didn't waste any time in talking, I think the sight of my face had frightened him.

He hurried me to an unused room in the building where there was a grand piano, and locked the door.

"Pomponard," I commenced, "something has happened. I—I don't think I can play—that is——" I stammered on, "cannot play as I used to. Can we cancel this concert now, before it is too late?"

Pomponard shook his head.

"It is more serious than I can explain to you, more serious than you think."

"Eet 'ees serious, but not so as you zink. 'Ave I not nursed you when you 'ave ze brain storms before, when you was ze little Michael? Hein do I not know? Fool zat I was to leave you all zis time over ze business."

Pomponard opened the grand piano, and sat down.

"Play, Michael," he said; "choose what you will."

About twenty minutes afterwards I put the violin down upon the piano, and asked Pomponard dully.

"Do you notice anything strange?"

"Ah! yes," cried Pomponard, "ze strangeness of ze incomparable beauty of ze tone, zat is all."

"Then he doesn't mean to take my gift away suddenly, perhaps it will be slowly.

"Oh, my God!"

I rested my hands upon my head, over the grand piano.

"Ze dinnair, zat is ze zing, and a leetle of ze good wine, hein you 'ave not eaten. I know it, I do smell it out. Come, we eat ze good zings. No more of zis damned nonsense. You 'ave 'ad a bad brain storm of ze nerves, all ze big ones of ze world 'as it. You 'ad it also when you was leetle, because even zen you was big. Come, ze dinnair."

I have never known tortures such as I knew that night, before I went on to play Saint-Saëns' "Concerto in B minor".

How often I had played it before, yet never with the awful fear gnawing at my heart that I might suddenly lose my power as Maliol had prophesied, perhaps in the middle of the performance.

I know my face was deadly white, although my hands were sure and steady, without a tremor.

I thought Sir Andrew Calmath, the famous conductor, who had often conducted the orchestra for me before in London, looked at me several times anxiously. His baton seemed to indicate more pointedly than usual every lead I had, as if he were afraid I should miss it.

At the end of the "Concerto" no great ovation followed, such as I had become accustomed to in all the other great cities where I had played. Only a cold, well-bred applause.

When I had finished playing "The Forbidden Dance of the Elves", in the second part of the programme, it almost

seemed to my over-wrought nerves, as if it were received in complete silence. Never before had I known it to meet with such a deadly chilling reception.

I was standing in a sort of dazed way in the artistes' room when Sir Andrew Calmath followed me out.

"The audience seem most anxious to hear you again, M'sieur Caviol. Is it asking too much of you to play again to them?"

"Play again?" I queried dully, "why there wasn't a hand."

Sir Andrew Calmath smiled.

"You must not judge them by Continental audiences, or even a London one. They hear everything, they are quiet and even cold; whether or no they fully appreciate the finer distinctions of violin playing is another matter, but they are not unappreciative.

"Might I ask, as a favour to myself, that you would play that exquisite little fragment you call 'Night in Venice'? I have only heard you play it once in London."

Listlessly, or so it seemed to me, I made my way on to the platform and played what Sir Andrew had asked of me—played it, so I thought, as if I were in a dream.

To me the concert ended, as it had started, as it had been all the way through. A dead wall enclosing dead people, whilst the only person condemned to live as in a trance, was the unfortunate soloist.

Pomponard insisted upon accompanying me back home to Gloucestershire. Upon the way home he enquired, "Well 'ow are you feeling, Michael?"

"Oh horrible, it has been a ghastly experience."

Pomponard looked at me curiously. "You played exceptionally finely, my Michael."

"So I should imagine," I retorted bitterly, "by the way the audience received me."

"Ze audience, ah! bah! zey loved you. 'Ave you not 'eard zat zey do zink zey are ze salt of ze 'ole earth; zat 'ees zair idea of ze polite attention, zey are wealthy and cold and 'ard, bah! I smell 'em."

I was unconvinced. I felt in some strange, subtle way that my powers were failing me.

I have brought it upon myself, I reasoned. I have broken that strange oath I took, now I shall have to bear the punishment.

Then an overwhelming horror took possession of me, and I asked myself wildly, "should I be able to bear it".

When we arrived at St. Freeda's Priory I dispatched Pomponard upstairs to bed.

He knew nothing of the secret "Treasure Chamber", but I made my way there. Marie was waiting for me.

Her arms were outstretched to receive me, her face was dimpled into a smile. She uttered the one word, "Well?"

I kissed her tenderly and led her to a chair. I stirred the logs of the fire, for even upon summer nights the high arched rooms always seemed to want the cheering warmth and light of its glow.

"Michael dear, I am waiting to hear. Was everything well?"

"No!"

"Michael, how do you mean?"

"I played for the first time in my life with scarcely a hand, no applause, no enthusiasm, and I believe they all had no interest whatever in my playing."

"Oh Michael, what can it mean?"

"Some strange subtle withdrawal of my gift, until it is slowly sapped away and ceases entirely to exist."

"Nothing will change your belief in that, Michael?"

"I cannot choose but believe it after to-night."

"What shall you do, Michael?"

"I—I don't think I shall play in public any more. I wouldn't go through what I have suffered to-day for anything or anybody.

"It is the beginning of the end, nothing is left."

She drew my head down until my lips met her mouth.

"Love is left, Michael."

* * * *

I awoke in "The Treasure Chamber" from a deep sleep. Marie was not there, I was alone. Then I remembered that knowing Pomponard had come to stay at St. Freeda's, she had doubtless left early in the morning for Castle-le-Sands, before anybody was about the house.

I also recollected that, before going to bed at dawn, I had not slept for over twenty-four hours. What time could it be? I looked at my watch. Four o'clock; which hour of four? The brilliant sunshine was pouring through the oriel window. I realized with amazement that it must be four o'clock in the afternoon of the following day. Why had I slept as heavily as that?

Want of sleep, of course; tired out in body and mind; no wonder that Marie had left me to my slumbers.

I wondered, with a grim sense of amusement, whether Pomponard was raging about St. Freeda's shouting my name and declining to believe that the earth had not swallowed me up.

I arose so hastily that a little perfumed note fell off the old point needlework coverlet on to the floor.

From Marie, I thought, as I smiled, telling me when she would arrange to meet me that day.

Perhaps I was late for the appointment already, I tore open the note.

My heart seemed to turn to stone, my pulse to stop beating as I read.

> "My loved one above all others, I am leaving you for good, for your good as well as mine, because what I do I now know to be for the best, the only thing left for us both."

I sat down upon the side of the great couch-bed and closed my eyes. I could not read any more for a few seconds because of the swimming in my head, and the feeling of blindness before me.

Then I forced myself to continue reading.

> "Michael, during the night something happened, so strange, so terrible, that I can only regard it as some awful warning.
>
> "Whilst you were fast asleep, you went through, and lived as it were, over again, a scene with this Angel or Devil Maliol, for I know not which he is.
>
> "The terrible memory of it all I do not think I can ever efface from my mind.
>
> Lying beside you, shivering with dread, and shaken by fear, I trembled for your brain lest it should not withstand the ordeal. I trembled for my own.
>
> "You spoke clearly and distinctly in your own natural voice, but the answers and accusations were spoken in another voice, the voice you believed to be Maliol's.
>
> "Terrible accusations they were, fraught with dreaded import and meaning.
>
> "You were being urged over and over again to choose betwixt love and your Art.

"Never shall I forget how, again and again, you pleaded for love, pleaded like any lost soul who is condemned for ever to be shut out of a Paradise that he has once enjoyed, but may never be allowed to enter again.

"The very love you and I had enjoyed that night, holy, beautiful, perfect, appeared to be flung into the balance and found wanting, according to the answers you were made to give against your will.

"Then with a sickening of my very soul I realized that *you would not be allowed to choose. Somehow the choice had been made for you for all time, irrespective of anything that you could ever do or desire.*

"Michael, my best loved and dearest, the only man I have ever loved or shall love, I will never stand in the way of your great art again.

"Your strange and most weird gift may have this limitation, but there seems no termination to its awful responsibilities, or its undreamed-of penalties.

"By some terrible and spiritual means you seem to have been given a trust, the burden of which must be too heavy for any mortal to bear.

"I am relieving that burden in the only way that I can think will lighten it, although I know full well it may seem to make it infinitely heavier at first.

"Do not attempt to follow me. You will never find me.

"There is yet one other reason that I forebore to mention to you when you returned after the concert, white and shaken, believing your gift of playing was departing from you. I had already received an Imperial order to return to my guardian and uncle, Prince Dmetri. I must obey.

"I shall never marry, and they cannot force me to do so.

"Dearest Michael, as I cherish your image and every moment of our love, so I know you will cherish mine. The memory of that at least can never be taken away from either of us. The strange symbol of your fate is hanging around your neck. I kissed it and afterwards kissed you upon your lips ere I took my last leave of you.

"MARIE."

* * * *

"Come home with me, Master Michael, please come home with me; the car is waiting for us, Master Michael.

"Faithfully I have loved you and served you since you were a little boy."

"Yes, yes you have, Nicolo."

"I broke in, with you sir, into that house, Castle-le-Sands, we saw all the signs of a hurried packing up, sir. She had gone. Patiently I searched with you, sir, and spent all those many hours at Charing Cross, Victoria, afterwards Newhaven, Dover and how many other places; you will never find her.

"I am not trying to know anything Master Michael, or seeking to interfere where I am not wanted, but the servant told me much, sir. Thank God I returned in time to follow you and be with you.

"Master Michael, would I could bear some of your terrible grief; indeed I would if I were able to do so. You loved her so?"

"Yes."

"But you love us too, Master Michael, me and Pomponard?"

"Yes, ever since I was a boy, Nicolo, but there are many different kinds of love."

"Yes, Master Michael I know, but, Master Michael, remember you have your art."

"Yes, Nicolo."

"I think, Master Michael, the two things in the world that cause the deepest agony are love and art; an unextinguishable legacy of pain always seems to accompany both. It seems awful, Master Michael."

"They are too beautiful to last Nicolo. A rose is beautiful, yet no lovely rose will last, save for a very little while."

"Yes Master Michael, you will come home now with me. I can't bear to see you look like that. Come home, Master Michael."

"Yes."

* * * *

Pomponard rustled the sheaf of London newspapers spread out before him upon the breakfast-table of the Refectory Room. "Hein it 'ees wonderful; t'ree of ze columns about you in some of zem, two columns in ozzers. Ze Albert 'All could 'ave been filled t'ree times over again

Ha! Ha! my Michael, so you zink zat your playing deter-i-o-ate, eh? My word, but I nevaire did see such a scene at a farewell concert before a artiste go abroad. 'Ark to what ze critics say."

"Oh I don't want to hear what they have to say, Pomponard."

Pomponard chuckled. His fierce little face with its white bristling moustache was wreathed in a good-natured grin.

"Ha! Ha! so one of zem zay in one part, ' 'Is 'and as it advances up ze neck of ze violin, weaving zose magic sounds, appears to us as ze white petals of an orchid climbing up ze golden stem of melody'."

"What rot!"

"Anozzer says, ah zis is true enough, but I feenish my breakfast; Nicolo 'ere can read it."

Accordingly Nicolo read from the newspaper in an appropriately solemn voice:

> "His playing had a wistfulness born of some unknown wild regret. A wistfulness beyond all power to describe, carrying us to a sphere where the tears of all the world had been shed, leaving only the memory of something too beautiful to grasp for our own. The singing of his violin could be likened to the voice of an angel, unaccountably wandering upon earth after the golden door of his own heavenly kingdom had been closed upon him, preventing any return to the spirit sphere."

"Don't read any more, I am going to pack."

"So, Michael, you do not mind ze idea of going on ze long tour to all ze South American States, afterwards ze United States. Hein! zey 'ave nevaire offered so many zousands in ze money for an artiste before. You go 'appy now, eh?"

"One place is much the same as another to me, Pomonard."

"Good—'ow we shall rake ze money in."

"Better that perhaps Pomponard whilst there is time."

"Time, ha! ha! time indeed, you are very young, Michael, ze grand career, ze great life before you."

"Perhaps, who knows."

"No per—'aps at all, it is of a cert. So you go to pack mon vieux."

"Yes "

"So I go on ze railway to London for all ze final beesiness. You leave ze great 'ouse 'ere wiz ze servants to look care of. You and Nicolo join me in London. I go to ze Grand 'Otel. You join me there, eh? Adieu!"

"Good-bye for the present, Pomponard."

Pomponard suddenly seemed to be smitten with doubt, and to remember himself of something.

"Michael, you will not 'ave a fit of ze indeecisions and go and wander off somewhere 'ozzer."

"No, no Pomponard, get off to the railway station or you will miss your train."

"Ah! I go on ze instant."

* * * *

Everything is packed.

A small bill to settle.

Wardour Street.

To repair to bows, violin strings etc, £9 18 6.

Too much trouble to go and fetch a cheque-book and write a cheque. Two five pound notes in my pocket; that will do.

With Michael Caviol's compliments.

I will leave it here on the table in the old lacquer box, and post it in the morning.

Now to close the windows and shut up "The Treasure Chamber".

No Treasure Chamber now, the greatest treasure of all the world has gone.

It is only a lovely empty tomb of dead hopes. A parched desert with the clinging, uncapturable odour of sweet briar and early violets.

A dim vault where no lovely nightingale will ever again sing of love.

Oh Marie! Marie! I think my heart is broken, and I am all alone.

There is the Painter's picture of me hanging there as the little Ishmael. It was true what he painted and what he said.

I am alone in the desert.

It was true what they have all said.

What Maliol has decreed will also come to pass, if not at once, it will come later.

"What do you fear, Michael?"

"I don't know."

"You believe that your powers, all your great gifts, will one day be taken away from you, as a punishment for breaking your oath to Maliol?"

"Yes."

"But think, Michael, how could such a thing come to pass?"

"I don't know."

"You have finished the book of your life so far, Michael?"

"Yes."

"You are going to close the book now, leaving it here where none can ever read it?"

"Yes."

"You will finish it years hence, when you come back again Michael?"

"Perhaps."

THE BOOK OF RED LIFE

I, Yavil Bracova, have been commanded to write this, for Michael can no longer use his hands; those beautiful hands of his, that once wrought the wondrous melodies upon the instrument I also play.

Oh dear God, I cannot bear to see them now, or look at them. I must begin as best I can from the beginning.

Michael told me to write what our lives have been, but I, little Bracova, as the students called me in time past, when I was really little, and as Michael calls me now because my stature is not great, cannot write English as I can speak it, as the writing of it is difficult for me.

We have come from the heart of Russia that used to be White Russia, but which is now Red Russia.

Red with fire and sword, pillage, and rape; from the foul horrors of which millions must have cried aloud to God in Heaven, that He might either end their miseries or destroy them all.

From the horrors we endured within St. Petersburg, now called Petrograd, it has taken us by the calendar one long year and seven months ere we could reach a place called Archangel, and thence to this place where Michael has guided us, which he says is Gloucestershire in England.

When we arrrived here footsore and weary, for Michael can scarce walk, we had in truth food within our knapsacks, yet did the long endless country lanes and valleys seem as desolate as the Russian wastes, for the snow was also here upon the ground.

When at last we paused, after many weary miles, before an ancient stone gate, he cried out aloud in the cracked hoarse voice which is now his, and pointed beside the great gate to where a big board was lashed to a stake. It had the words "Sold" upon it, and then followed the names of the agents who had sold it.

He drew me inside the gate and we made our way across long woods and gardens.

When we reached the house it was shuttered up and barred, nor was there anyone within, it stood deserted, silent, and empty.

Michael knew of some means by which he could get inside the house, and afterwards he guided me through in the darkness. He seemed to know his way, for he bade me strike no light.

It was a big room we entered first, and sufficient light from the clear frosty night came into it over some arched windows above the shutters.

He pressed hard upon what looked to me like a stone fireplace in the dimness. Then he guided me down a short dark passage and up some steps.

"Strike a light now Bracova," he said, "you will find candles in brackets.

"Is this your house?" I whispered, for I felt that I was housebreaking.

"It was," he mumbled.

"But is it yours no longer, then?"

"God knows whose it is; have you got that light?"

I struck it, and feebly the flame shot up. I lighted several candles. I noticed that it was cold and damp, the dust of much time lay upon everything, but it seemed to me that we had entered an old and beautiful, what do you call it, an église.

I stood wholly amazed at the carvings and pictures, making altogether the strange beauty of the place wherein I found myself.

Michael was fumbling inside two big red leather boxes, and slowly bringing out logs which he threw into the great stone fireplace. I helped him with this, setting light to them also.

Whilst they burned up, and I was lighting more candles that we might have a better light, he took an old red silk covering and hung it over a carved mirror. *He wished not that it should reflect his face.*

Oh Michael, Michael, my Master, more than brother, my preserver who gave to me everything I have ever had in my life, my education, my art, my all, who fended for me, paid for me, saved me, and in the end fought for me, what can I do for you now, save try to cling to you and console you?

The vile red revolutionaries of Russia have destroyed the wondrous beauty of your face and form, have set their foul

mark upon your once magic hands to the everlasting loss of art.

Oh Michael, my Master of all musicians, what am I, poor Bracova, able to do for you?

My tears are blotting the page; I can scarce write for them, yet you have bid me write none of this.

What you bade me to do was to turn over the last pages of a manuscript lying within an old red Morocco cover, upon the long oak table.

"What is this manuscript?" I asked.

"The story of my life, Bracova."

He was crouched over the fire, turned away from me. The now bright fire only lighted upon the outline of a huddled heap in a big chair.

"May as well have the end," he muttered. "There is not much to tell, and you are the only one beside myself who knows it, and can write it.

"You have read the last page?"

Struggling for composure I said, "Yes".

"Well, write first, 'Maliol has kept his word only too well, the blow has fallen'."

"Michael?"

"Yes."

"Who was Maliol?"

"No matter, write that first Bracova, and then set down everything you know and witnessed in the City of Red Horror, from the time I first found you there.

* * * *

All Europe has been in a blaze for three years, but the place most in a blaze was Petrograd.

Great White, patient, enduring Russia had suddenly turned and become Red all through. Red with blood, rape, fire, sword, and looting.

My studies at the Conservatoire were fortunately all but finished. The studies that Michael had paid for all those years, which great gift to me will always enable me to earn my living as a solo violinist.

It was impossible to leave the city, for nobody could do so.

The time came when, together with many other young students, I was seized upon by the Soviet, as they called themselves, and made to become one of them.

The scenes I witnessed were unutterable, nor would I take part in any of the outrages of violence, lust, and revenge, unless I was compelled to do so. Yet many dreadful things I had to witness, and most revolting acts I had to do although I may have been spared somewhat upon account of my youth.

But I was under cruel and relentless taskmasters, glutted with their sense of sudden power, and I was forced in a great measure to do what I was told, otherwise be shot like a dog, or worse still, slowly tortured in some Bolshevist prison.

I have seen tortures that have sickened all my soul, so that even the bayonets of the Bulgarians from whom I had suffered as a little boy, seemed preferable in comparison.

One of the cruelest and most relentless of the beasts, with power over most of us, was a man called Levinski.

This man was a mad fanatic, yet secretly only working for what he could gain and all he could loot.

To make it worse, he was a bloodthirsty man and a drunkard, with the face of a Satyr and a soul like Satan.

To crown the very depths of my disgust, I discovered by accident one night, during a wild orgie, within a great barn-like building where he and other brother Soviets in high command plotted their daily and nightly iniquities, that he was a violinist of no mean order.

Drunk as he was, he seized a violin and bow, and swore he would make them listen to his playing.

I, too, listened, and I was shocked to the very centre of my innermost susceptibilities. He looked like a fiend out of hell, and he played like one.

Not being used to much writing, my thoughts may lead me away so that I digress. Therefore, I hasten on to the early hours of that fateful night which was our overthrow and ruin, mine as well as Michael's. Yes, more the ruin of poor unhappy Michael, for I at least am whole.

Upon this night it so chanced that I was departing after feeding at a little-known restaurant off Great Morskoy Street. At this time many of the larger restaurants were subjected to sudden raids, and bloodshed, and insults.

In the shadow of the street, as I was hastening away, I heard my name called softly, twice over. "Bracova, Bracova."

I seemed to know the voice, but one glimpse of the face above the tightly buttoned-up fur coat showed me it was my benefactor, whom I was never likely to forget, Michael Caviol.

I greeted him with all the warmth of my regard for him. He was carrying in one hand his famous and valuable violin case I remembered so well in Paris.

Sadly and shamefacedly I pointed to the red Soviet badge of my servitude.

"You see," I exclaimed, "what I am, because I am made to be so."

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, "that is why you will be able to help me."

"M'sieur Michael," I answered, "what are you doing in this city of red horror? How can I possibly help you? I am only a common sort of soldier-slave, commanded in life or to the death by devils."

"Listen, Bracova," he said, "there isn't any too much time in which to work, but it is your turn to help me now, it is life or death. Will you do it?"

"Yes," I said, "a thousand times yes."

I grasped his hands and looked up into his wonderfully handsome face that hadn't changed at all in those years, although he was looking very set and stern.

"Take me, Bracova, without a moment's delay, to the headquarters of this man, Levinski."

I shuddered.

"For Heaven's sake consider, M'sieur Michael; it is impossible. You go to the very den of lions thirsting for blood."

"Notwithstanding, I go, even if I have to sit with them all night like Daniel."

"It is madness; you don't know Levinski."

"Bracova, I know more about Adrian Levinski than you will ever know."

I considered how I could possibly turn him from his, as I believed, disastrous purpose.

"What do you seek of him?"

We were whispering, as we walked quickly along, for fear of listeners in this dreadful city of suspicion and unknown terrors.

"A passport, signed by him, for myself and my servant from this city to the port of Riga."

"You would only be allowed to leave the city with

his signed passport," I answered, "provided you are able to get it."

"It is not for myself, Bracova, I want it for the woman I love. She is an aristocrat in this city, at present she is in hourly danger, Bracova."

"Dear God, yes," I cried out, "only this afternoon a young girl of birth and title was brought in and they—oh, I can't tell you."

"I know, I know," he said, "to save her even from the risk of such a thing, I will stop at nothing.

"Bracova, you saw the Duc de Choiseuil that night with me in Paris, at the Beaux Arts?"

"Yes."

"His yacht is waiting at Riga now to take the woman I love to England. His car with a chosen driver is waiting ready to start for Riga now. Only the passports, Bracova—I must get them."

"M'sieur Michael, no woman will be allowed to leave, if the passport is made out in your name, you yourself, will have to be identified by it a dozen times."

"I have arranged it all so far, she will be dressed as a man, in my clothes. The car will be closed, she will be muffled up to the eyes, and this will be identification enough."

He swung the rare red leather violin case, with its long golden clasps, into view for a moment.

"When they discover the trick you have played them, they will shoot you."

"I would cheerfully be shot in such a cause. By the powers the Duc de Choiseuil possesses, for he is in the Secret Service during the war, I was told of her need. He arranged what he could, I arranged what I could. His influence got me here, so far, safely into Russia, and then all our plans came to naught.

"An obstinate old woman, the Grand Duchess Vassilli, refused to be got away into safety until to-day. The woman I love remained with her, and would not desert her. She is now waiting, alone and deserted herself. save by a couple of servants, for me to try against heavy odds to effect her escape."

"M'sieur Michael, if you succeed, as I pray the good God you may, you will assuredly have to pay the price."

"I shall pay it, Bracova."

He looked so brave and calm, almost gay, that I loved

him for it as I had always loved him.

"M'sieur Michael?"

"Yes."

"What is the name of the woman you love so much that you are giving your—" I gulped for a bit, I couldn't go on—"your brilliant, wonderful life for?"

"The Princess Marie Idourska, little Bracova."

"Ah! the most lovely woman in Europe, and the most hated in Russia."

"The hatred is not towards her," he answered, "but for her wretched uncle, Prince Dmetri, and her worse cousin, Prince Paul Alexis."

"Her fate will be the same as theirs," I replied, "if she ever falls into their hands."

"She never shall. Only secret messages have passed between us since I returned but a few days ago to Russia, after leaving America. She is alone until I see her late to-night, when I mean to get her safely away, but she is armed and will not hesitate to use it upon herself before she would ever fall into their hands."

"Is it hopeless for you to leave with her?"

"Quite, a trained chauffeur, a Secret Service agent who knows every inch of the difficult road, is provided by the Duc de Choiseuil; this man will drive her."

"Travelling as your man?"

"Yes."

"But can she ever look sufficiently like you to pass for you?"

"We have to risk it, all her hair will be cut off by now."

"But the clothes, M'sieur Michael, your height, they could not very well fit a woman."

"Clothes made especially like mine in every detail, cut down to fit her, were smuggled into the Idourska Palace at the Nevski Prospect yesterday."

"You have left little to chance."

"Nothing, save the passports."

"I pray you may get them, but we are nearing the place, it is one of the merchant's granaries. They killed the merchant and divided up his grain amongst the Soviet. You run sufficient risk, M'sieur Michael, without taking in that valuable case with all your violins in it. Levinski loots all jewels, and particularly violins and 'cellos; he collects them for himself. Why, the other night, he

formed a crazy band and declared they were playing, about thirty of them, upon some of the rarest instruments imaginable; they had all been looted by force."

"Well, little Bracova, I propose to add to his collection by presenting Levinski with three of the finest violins in the world, my own."

I gasped at Michael's daring audacity.

"If I work this man the right way, I think I can put him into the right humour to give me passports, but don't be surprised at anything I do or say."

"How do you come to know so much about this man Levinski, M'sieur Michael?"

"I was once his pupil," Michael answered.

"Oh, impossible," I cried, "playing as you do, impossible!"

"Nevertheless, it is true, years ago when I was a boy. It is my only chance now of getting what I want. I am going to work upon that for all I am worth."

I felt dumbfounded and absolutely amazed at this piece of news, but my astonishment then was nothing to be compared to what I subsequently witnessed after we had been admitted to the Soviet Granary.

The whole history of that night, from the moment we entered the Soviet Headquarters, was like unto a swiftly-moving and most terrible nightmare, the awakening from which was to be yet more awful.

It is impossible for me to say whether or no it was fortunate for Michael's purpose that we arrived sufficiently early before the night meetings took place. The entire building would then be crowded with armed and shouting savages, filled with lust, and yelling for renewed deeds of blood.

Only a dozen or so of the Soviets in command were present as we entered.

All had been drinking, as the half-filled bottles of looted Russian brandy and the glasses and cups scattered around testified.

With a deep and unutterable thankfulness I noted that one of the vilest among these Soviet leaders, even worse than Levinski, was not present.

In build this man was a giant, red-haired and thick-lipped. A low-class Russian Jew named Serge Moldovitch, undoubtedly the most loathsome thing that the boiling

seething scum of the revolution had flung up to the surface, to survive in iniquity.

This creature it was who had done unutterable things to the young girl that afternoon. He it was who had pinned the helpless grain merchant to the door of his own counting house, and he had laughed loudly as he watched him die in agony.

Yes, luckily for Michael, this man was not present, or he, with superior numbers at his back, would have overpowered Michael.

Levinski sprawled at a table alone, a bottle of Russian brandy stood before him; he was engaged in scratching his signature over papers.

I knew those papers, they were death warrants. My heart beat so, and seemed to be, as the expression is, in my mouth, as Michael went straight up to this blood-stained leader of the Red Revolution, and flung his arms around his neck, with all the warmth of greeting in the Russian manner.

"My dearly loved master, found at last," he cried, "my guardian that was to be, from whom I was torn away and kidnapped as a child."

Michael's words came back to me—"Do not be surprised at anything I say or do."

Michael was acting with his very life in his hands. Levinski shook himself together. With the stupidity of a semi-drunken stare, his eyes blinked at the wonderful, radiant face of Michael.

Michael was apparently regarding him with all the rapturous delight that one would give to the dearest of earthly friends, suddenly and unexpectedly restored.

"So it is Michael Caviol?" he stuttered slowly, "Michael who ran away."

"My beloved master, benefactor and more than friend, never! never! did I run away. Relations from England came when my grandmother disappeared, no one knows where. They bore me away by force, protesting and against my will. They seized my violin; the Guadagnini which had been solemnly promised to you. With tears I pleaded that it belonged to you, that it was a sacred promise; they beat me and would not listen to me. I was but a little boy."

"The notice upon the shop in the Rue Notte was written by you?"

"Beloved master, they forced me to write it. From Marseilles they took me by force, without the power to leave you even a message or write you a word, took me to America."

A change had come over Levinski's face. He was leering now at Michael, gloatingly, and almost affectionately.

"So that is where you have been all these years?"

Michael drew out a sheath of papers from the pocket of his coat.

Not until long afterwards did I learn for certain these were skilfully prepared forgeries to be used in case of desperate need.

"See I am an American citizen," he declared. "All the great ones in America are around me, and at the back of me. Your great cause here is their cause. When I learned that you, the most gifted violinist of this age, had become one of the greatest leaders of men, I made them send me here.

"Cast your eyes over the greetings I bring you, read the great names attached which I have enlisted and directed in your cause, see the power I can, with your help, command."

"Oh, Michael," I thought, "you are upon dangerous ground, your feet are veritably upon the edge of a precipice."

Then Michael unlatched and flung open the lid of his costly violin case, disclosing the precious violins. "I have brought you something more than mere messages dear master," he spoke with all the excited pleasure of a child. "I will show at least that the good faith which I was not allowed to keep to you in the past, I have more than fulfilled."

"See what I have collected for you alone, the instruments you have wanted so all your life, the instruments your hands alone are fit to play, you my great teacher, who taught me all I ever knew.

"See, I bring you, for your own, a perfect Stradivarius, a superb Guarnerius, a Bergonzi beyond price. Have I not more than kept my trust? Have I not cherished your memory?"

Levinski's hands greedily clutched the treasures, and he examined them gloatingly one after the other. He was murmuring rapturously over them before he flung his arms around Michael's neck.

Michael was closing the violin case again.

The other men present had heard every word of the great adulation of Levinski. Michael's praise had acted upon the man's vanity like a speedy intoxication produced by some rare wine.

Among themselves they were remarking, "Surely this is Michael Caviol, the great violinist. So he was the pupil of Levinski and his life-long friend, our friend as well, he said so."

I crept out unobserved towards the door, to keep watch. I dreaded the hour when the other hordes would burst loose into the Granary.

Michael would not find it so easy then; he might be swept off his feet, lose his head, or his marvellous nerve; he would be lost then.

When next I peeped through the door, Michael was putting some papers into his pocket. The red Soviet Seal was attached to them. The hateful Levinski seemed to be entering into some solemn compact with Michael. He was speaking so low that nobody but Michael could hear what he said.

I could see that time and again he was urging Michael to some purpose of his own, whether social, political or financial, I could not guess. Whatever it was I knew it must be of a hateful nature, as the man himself was hateful.

Michael's face was very pale, but he seemed to be eagerly agreeing to everything Levinski said. Then he embraced Michael again and again in the Russian manner, pointing towards the violins lying upon the table, before Michael tore himself away.

It was not a moment too soon. I grasped his coat as he left the Granary.

"Quick, behind these pillars," I said. Advancing to the Granary was a shouting, raving rabble, spirit maddened, soul soddened, with the stains of blood upon them, both old and new.

Much of it was new. One beast was wiping the red smears from his hands upon his coat.

Hidden in the black shadow behind the pillars we could view them scrambling and jostling in hundreds, flitting past like the outpouring of some hideous den of demons suddenly unloosed from their secret hiding-place, to wreak their foul will upon mankind.

Many of them flung their rifles, with the bayonets ready fixed, in stacks against the stone pillars which formed the Granary's big outer porch. They piled swords and lances in heaps, and hand grenades; they left about also many bombs.

Within the deep shadow of the end stone pillar we stood concealed and noted everything.

Well for us we did not venture forth from our hiding-place, for it was only the vanguard. An added roar broke out upon the night; a hideous tumult swelling in savage triumph swept round the street.

The unwieldy, red-haired Russian Jew, Serge Moldovitch, marched at the head of the oncoming rabble. Hatless and coatless he yet flourished in his hands, as if he was gradually becoming used to it, a long cavalry sword.

Red drips from this soldier's weapon he dishonoured, fell upon the pure white snow that lay powdering the ground. He was shouting hoarsely to those marching immediately around him, outcasts from a lower hell like himself, yet who regarded him as a leader and a hero.

"To Levinski with the news," he yelled," our men have driven this skulking mangy fox to his lair, this tyrant and oppressor, this nobleman Prince."

"Kill him," yelled back the mob, "cut him in pieces."

"Aye, sure enough afterwards, but smoke him first out of his lair."

"Where will he run to earth to hide? Where I say?" raved the Jew, "why to the Palace in the Neviski Prospect."

"Burn it down," shrieked the others, "burn it and bomb them out."

"Yes," snarled the Jew, "but take Levinski with us, and all the others. Understand me, every one of you, use no bombs.

"I want Prince Idourska alive, and the young Princess alive also; I have use for both of them, particularly for her."

There was a shout of coarse laughter, then amidst obscene jests, too horrible for ears to hear, the last of the mob scrambled into the building and slammed the Granary door.

Strangely, like the sudden quickness with which a

noble animal springs, Michael noiselessly pounced upon two of the big cavalry swords the rabble had stacked against the pillars.

"Hide them under our coats," he said. "Quick, we must run for it, if we are to be in time."

* * * *

Ivan, an old Russian, stealthily let us in by one of the back entrances of the Idourska Palace and barred the door again behind us.

"Ivan waits, and guards here," he said in Russian.

Inside the Palace, we ran up one broad staircase and down another in the form of a great arch.

There, in a room, waiting, we found two men dressed as for a long motor journey.

The shorter man of the two was young and strangely handsome. Was it a young man? I looked searchingly at the wonderful disguise whilst Michael was rapidly giving directions. It was the Princess Marie Idourska, but none would have ever recognized her. Dressed in Michael's clothes she might have almost passed for him before anyone not knowing Michael intimately.

The only difference was that her closely cropped curly hair was black, and Michael's hair was brown. The difference in height had been cleverly altered.

She lifted her head to kiss him farewell.

"Michael, my love, you will join me in England. I will do all that you have ever wished; there is *a reason now more than ever*."

"Yes, yes. Go, Marie, don't lose a minute." He thrust the two passports into her pocket. "These passports are your safety," he said, "and above all, the sight of this violin case will save you; never let go of it, hold it prominently before you. Take this revolver; only use it as a last resource." Then he turned to the man.

"The car is all ready, a short distance off?"

"Yes, sir, everything."

"Right, go then."

"But, Michael, Michael," she cried out. "What of you?"

"I wait; hasten, Marie."

"Stop!" a voice exclaimed.

A bulky red-faced man suddenly rushed into the room.

"If the Princess Idourska flies, I go with her," declared the new arrival.

He pushed his way towards the Princess Marie, as she was about to pass out of the door.

The Secret Service agent who was to be her chauffeur upon her perilous journey that night, held it open for her. Michael thrust the stranger back with considerable force, closing the door after Marie, and stood with his back against it.

Michael's next words told me who the man was. "Prince Idourska," he said, "the Princess leaves alone, save for one chosen escort. The passports are only for two; you are not included. Your presence with her would cost her life. You do not pass until she is safely away."

Quick as lightning the man wrested my sword from underneath my arm. He was blind with rage and mad to escape, regardless of anything or anybody.

By means of the sword he meant to cut Michael down and follow the others.

Michael was ready for him. He whipped out the sword he had taken outside the Granary, from underneath his coat.

Dear Lord! how they fought. Sheer savagery upon the Prince's part, the like upon Michael's, save something added to it, and that was science.

I realized that Michael was a superb swordsman, although I had not known of this before. I watched, powerless to do ought and not daring to interfere.

They must so have fought for ten minutes by the clock. Then there came a lightning-like turn of Michael's wrist; he dropped upon one knee. Oh, God! Had he fallen at the mercy of the Russian. No, the Prince's weapon went flying out of his hand, Michael's sword was at his heart.

Death was very near him then; death was very near to all of us, nearer than we had thought.

Whilst Michael had been compelled to stay and fight this man, the precious moments slipping away had been wasted.

I seized the sword knocked from the Prince's hand, to defend myself, as a prolonged hoarse roar from a vast mob, thirsting for blood, seemed to swell out and surround the Palace, filling the air with unknown terrors.

Prince Idourska heard that sound, heard the smashing

and splintering blows upon the door at the back of us, through which the Princess had so lately passed with little in the way of time to spare.

He heard the reverberating thuds, more terrifying still, telling of a deadly purpose, upon the great front doors of the Palace, just down the arched stairway in front of us.

Prince Idourska's face was no longer red; it had become a yellowy white.

He rushed from the room, up the curved staircase; we followed. We dashed up a second half-arch stairway, curving at right angles from the first one we had ascended.

It was too late; we were trapped upon all sides. A terrible wild singing of some revolutionary song surged above the deafening blows, whilst they battered down the front doors at the end of the big vestibule, a stairway-and-a-half below us. Then came the blinding flash and explosion of a bomb, followed by shivering and splintering of falling masonry.

The broad stairway up which we were fleeing rocked and tilted, the outside wall at the back of us upon which the stone stairway was built, partly disappeared, blown out into the night.

The roar of the mob was now deafening, as the cold freshness of the night poured in through the immense gaping hole in the wall behind us.

It was only cold for a short space; the blue gap of the night became red and sulphurous and heated.

Incendiary fire bombs had been thrown; the palace was upon fire at the side and the back of us; we could feel the heat as of a growing furnace.

The mob had burst into the great hall just below us. They wore red badges and they saw red, every one of them. Bolshevists, sailors, soldiers, peasants, all were armed with lances, swords, bayonets, and bombs. They all carried flaming torches to fire the place.

Through the glare of these flaming smoking torches, a saturnalia but a few feet beneath us, baffling all description, was revealed.

Then the piercing shrieks of a woman in dreadful agony rang through the place, again and again. Four of the fiends were advancing up the stairway towards us. They had spitted the body of a woman upon four tall

lances and were waving her body, suffering mortal agony, before them like a banner.

The misguided Grand Duchess Vassili had ventured once too often back to the Palace to get more of her jewels. The lovely Princess Idourska's sacrifice for her, had been, after all, in vain.

By the irony of fate, rich jewels and necklaces hung all about her neck and breasts. Whilst she was mutilated and dying, the brutes tore the jewels from off her and flung the body into the hall beneath.

The sight he had just seen made Prince Idourska mad with terror; he knew quite well what he had to expect for himself.

A few of the first among the advancing mob had caught a glimpse of us in the corner of the stairway as they poured up the steps; the man, Serge Moldovitch was leading with a drawn sword.

He saw Michael and myself were ready for him with our heavy cavalry swords, but doubtless he thought we should not be able to offer any resistence either to himself or the hordes behind him. Moldovitch also saw Prince Idourska.

Stopping at the foot of the stairway, he parleyed.

"Prince Idourska, we can take you when we choose—do what we like with you, yes—exactly what we like—and at our leisure. Would you care to have your life spared without torture, and go free?"

"Yes, yes, yes!" gasped the Prince, "what do you want?"

"Tell me where the Princess Marie Idourska is. She is not within the palace as I expected. Is she in the rooms upstairs beyond you. If so, make way."

"She is not there."

"No. Then you will tell us where she is?"

"Yes, yes, she has just——"

There was a swift movement from Michael beside me, his sword went straight through Prince Idourska's heart.

Michael shook it free, and the Prince's body rolled down almost to the feet of his enemies.

* * * *

Of the pandemonium that followed this act, I, Bracova, scarce know how to write, for it needs more than the power of my pen, as I can use it, to say what happened within the

space of time so short, yet so crowded with horror.

Up the stairs they rushed to cut us down. Michael met them at the corner angle of the steps as they wound round.

His sword did fearful execution; he was fighting and slaying like any devil, and I, Bracova, fought beside him with all my strength.

I had suffered long ago in the past from the cruel bayonet-thrusts of the Bulgarians. I would live to suffer such, no more.

We fought as men fight for their lives when all hope is gone, but we had the advantage of the upper steps, and moreover, a corner of these as well; otherwise, we could have made no stand. Michael's whirling sword, relentless in its accuracy, made of the stairway a veritable shambles.

Those who sought to fight their way up, did so over steps slippery with blood; they had to climb over the heaped-up bodies of the dead ere they could reach us.

Serge Moldovitch hacked and fought his way up, slashing wildly with his sword; but Michael parried those blows, and took his head off at a stroke.

The huge body reeled and fell back upon those who were ascending after the Jew.

Hoarse shouts of consternation followed the death of their leader; something amounting to a panic occurred among them.

I have always believed, since the corner turn of the stairway hid us from view, those below, not being able to see us, imagined a considerable body of armed men were offering a formidable resistance.

In that brief pause after Moldovitch's death, which served to make those below suddenly cautious and slower in ascending, lest they should meet with the same fate as their leader, Michael called to me.

"Bracova, jump from that hole in the wall at the back of us."

"It is high," I called, "and below is a raging furnace."

"Better than this," he answered. "Just a chance; we can't hold out. I will keep them back and try to follow you. Go——"

I scrambled to the gaping hole in the wall; outstretched far below me was a smouldering red fire. How deep beneath me it seemed.

For a small space I hesitated, as one does before taking

a leap to certain death. Wildly I looked back, to see if Michael was following me, and the strangest sight of all that grim and bloody night met my eyes.

A giant sailor was advancing up the stairs alone, towards Michael.

I can recall even now the huge frame, bronzed-burnt face, the high cheek-bones, and sinister aspect of that sailor, wearing two immense gold earrings hanging from his ears, a cutlass gripped in his hand.

What had happened to Michael?

He was not making the least attempt to guard himself, but was gazing at the man as if mesmerized.

Michael could have killed him over and over again, as he had killed the others, yet he stood still and made no movement.

I saw the giant-like seaman rush at Michael and lift him up in his arms as if he were no heavier than a child.

It was all over then, I thought. I hesitated no longer.

I jumped down, down—falling upon almost burnt-out wood, but also among the heaped-up stone debris, stones that were red-hot, and burned through and through everything that touched them.

Over them I went as fast as I was able, scrambling for the outer fringe of them, where there was no fire any longer.

I was in time to see the giant sailor lift Michael, and fling him out of the opening after me, as if he had been no more than a sack of coals.

Michael fell amidst the burning debris and lay without movement, amid those red-hot stones.

Burned as I was, I tried to get back to help him; but another was there before me, struggling to save him, ere I could possibly have reached him.

Adrian Levinski, uttering wild mad words, the full import and significance of which I was suffering too much to grasp, was pulling Michael away from amidst the blazing wood, and those searing red-hot stones.

Struggling to lift the insensible form of Michael, Levinski was getting terriby burned himself.

Tottering towards them I helped him to bring the hanging motionless body the remainder of the way out of the fire.

Then Levinski fell back; he was dreadfully burned.

Bad as he was, he had given his life to bring Michael out of that red-hot oven.

After this effort, something seemed to burst in my head and I fell over Michael's body, thankful that we had fallen upon snow-powdered grass, out of the contact of those burning red-hot stones.

* * * *

To awake to consciousness after passing through a nightmare possessing all the supposed characteristics of the nethermost hell; to find one is still remaining within another hell, is a ghastly experience; yet unto this I awoke, finding myself in utter darkness.

Wet straw was underneath me where I lay; a hoarse voice moaning in delirium was beside me.

From the rambling of broken sentences, I knew it was Michael. I could feel his body there but I could not see him.

I groped around the blackness with my hands. The walls of the place were wet, water was dripping from overhead.

With a sinking of my heart I realized it was not water, it was blood, and it was warm.

To shriek aloud and beat upon the walls in a mad panic to get away from the place, was my first thought.

Everywhere was the fearful odour of burnt flesh. Whatever one touched had the slime of blood upon it.

Then across my numbed brain came the thought that if I did so we should simply be murdered and none would know.

In some chamber overhead I became aware that unutterable things were happening. Through gaps above me, where there must have been partly broken away ceiling-joists, a woman's shrieks sounded as clearly as if she were beside me.

"Oh, no, no, no!" she entreated. "No, not that; have mercy, kill me." Then followed men's coarse laughter, ending in further piercing shrieks.

I covered my ears with my hands to shut out those awful sounds.

* * * *

Sometimes by day, or it might have been by night, since both were alike in that place, one or other of two different men, to judge from their voices, both of them

always drunken, would unbolt a door and thrust in some sort of food.

It was usually coarse bread made from bran, and a bowl of filthy stinking soup. Being starved I would devour it, sometimes I gave Michael some.

The lantern they carried was always left outside, then the door was rebolted.

Why were we being kept alive at all? I asked myself in bitterness. Were we to be assassinated in secret, made an exhibition of in public, or, like the people upstairs, should we be tortured?

So the days and nights went by; we were alone, defenceless, powerless.

It took me many days that must have spread into weeks, before I could gather the outline and shape, or what manner of place formed our prison.

I found out at length, but there is little need to describe it. The infamous fame of that once stable, converted into a garage, has rung round the universe, to take in history its foremost place among the foulest things that can shock a sickened universe for all time.

Lest any should not know the details, or that perchance they should prefer to have forgotten, is the only reason I write of what I can never forget.

Our two guards or gaolers, at the rare intervals when they visited us, entered from an outer tiled coach-house, where vehicles had been kept.

A thick wall and door divided us, and high up upon the same side was the usual barred opening for passing in fodder to the horses.

We were imprisoned in the inside stable. From the outer room I could only suppose some wooden steps led to the hay-loft above. The loft now used for rape and torture, afterwards the massacre of all unfortunate ones, men and women, who ever entered the fatal death-chamber, were they aristocrats or peasants.

It was long after Michael's ravings had stopped, and he seemed again to have recovered his senses, that he questioned me as to what place we were in.

I answered him as well as I could.

Whenever such rough food as we had was brought us, I fed him, for he did not seem to be able to use his hands.

Although I could see no better than himself, as I

supposed, in the darkness, he would grope about as if he could only feel.

Once or twice in whispers, in which we now always conversed, I questioned him.

Michael remained strangely silent, he would not answer me.

There came a time when, after one of the many agonizing, shrieking scrimmages, that took place so frequently above us, something came clattering down from overhead and fell somewhere in our fetid and well-nigh unbearable prison.

Michael was feeling his way about, groping for it.

For my own part I did not care what it was, nothing could be of any use to us. Nothing, I thought, could end our misery in any way, save one thing alone, and that was death.

I heard a low, quick sound from Michael; he had found the thing that had come rattling down to us.

"Bracova!"

"Yes."

"It is a butcher's knife, a long, sharp butcher's knife."

"Of what use is it?"

The whisper that came back to me in answer, appalled me.

"What I have prayed for, a knife, to cut their throats, if I have the strength to cut them."

* * * *

The night came when a larger hoard than usual of prisoners were hustled up the wooden stairs to the place above. Amidst blows and cries they were driven in for the time being, and the door was bolted upon them.

A greater crowd than was customary, of drunken butchers, stumbled down the stairs again. They shouted and wrangled, fought and cursed, whilst they divided money and the spoils of the captured.

Amidst the quarrelling and the jingling of money, bottles of spirits were being passed round and fought for, so gradually they became more muddled and intoxicated.

Above all the rest a voice was shouting drunkenly, with an addition of the vilest and lowest of Russian adjectives. "Let's get the last batch and set fire to the whole lot.

We're sick of it all. Let us hear these precious ones squeal as we burn them up."

Michael had risen and was standing up tense and stiff.

"Won't they shriek for mercy. Well, comrades, haven't we shrieked for it in the past?"

"Did we get it?"

"No, no, that's right, let's fetch the last lot, and burn them all together.

"Ha, ha, ha! Both our comrade gaolers drunk and asleep. Well I guess the fire will wake them up, and the others can't get out. Any of our lot in the place next door?"

Swiftly I felt Michael pulling the straw over both of us.

Nobody opened the door, it remained shut.

The drunken wretches departed jostling each other, singing, shouting, and arguing, without knowing what they were disputing.

* * * *

A brighter light outside than we had yet seen, coming from more lanterns than had been used before, though not enough to fully illuminate our inner prison, sufficed to show the opening above us.

A square space divided by two iron bars far apart, where bundles of hay had once been passed through. A human body could pass through those bars as well.

Our eyes were upon that patch of light outlined against two upright iron bars.

* * * *

I was whimpering like any frightened child.

"Michael, I can't do it.

"I fought beside you, but I can't, I can't murder them in cold blood, whilst they are in a drunken sleep."

"Help me upon your shoulders then, to reach that opening. I will never be burnt again, Bracova. Do this and help me after."

In his mouth he held the knife. He grasped, he fumbled, then I heard a body drop upon the other side. Two awful choking cries sounded one after the other.

I heard the jangling of keys, a fumbling at the door; a faint light through told me it was open. I groped my way to it.

Michael had put out the other lanterns; only one remained lighted and there might be a need to extinguish this quickly. The remaining lantern was thrust into my hand. "Quick, Bracova, get their coats, hats, big boots, badges, quick for your life. Now their revolvers, matches, everything. Help me on with the boots and coat. Pull the boots, that's right, now your own."

I stripped the things off as he bid me do. The sight of those bodies will never cease to haunt me.

Michael was bending over them emptying all the money and notes, of which there was a great quantity, from all their pockets. Each corpse he rifled of their Soviet passes, maps and papers, with the red seals attached.

"Take that man's knife," he commanded. "Get to the door, I am putting the lantern out, now help me through the door. Close it again. Put this lantern in your pocket. Is anyone about?"

I could hardly see at all, by reason of the darkness we had endured so long.

"I do not think any of the men are here," I answered.

"Come then."

* * * *

Nearly a mile away we could see the red glow in the sky, far in the distance we could hear those awful shrieks.

The place that was lately a shambles, had been transformed by the mob into an auto-da-fé. A burning torch of human beings ascended to the sky, crying aloud for vengeance and for justice.

High above that flaming glare the sky was of a purple velvet blue, set with tranquil silvery stars.

Sparkling snow in all its purity powdered the earth, as if to enwrap it lovingly within a white woven garment.

* * * *

All my life I shall be bitterly ashamed of something I have now to relate, and yet it must be told, although it is the most discreditable thing that has happened in the eighteen and a half hears I have lived.

Painfully and slowly as we dragged our limbs along, after the many weeks of cramped imprisonment, we were yet safe whilst crawling through the unlighted outskirts of the city.

Never once were we challenged or asked our business.

Strange that two great-coats still soaking in blood, and two red badges should have been our protection. Yet it was so, and no finer passports could we have possibly possessed in that land where blood alone had become the sign manual against molestation, sometimes in death, and nearly always in life.

Due north we headed by instinct, guessing full well that all other roads, barriers, and particularly ports, would be closed to us. With the covering of darkness still about us we reached the outer fringe of the interminable woods and spaces. These stretched miles upon miles north by east between Petrograd and Archangel.

Within a dense wood, so black with the towering trunks of trees that they entirely blotted out the sky, we paused. We were completely lost amidst the bleak, endless trees and the snow.

"Light the lantern, Bracova."

I did so, and as the steady flame of it waxed bright in the frosty air I held the lantern up.

Then to my lasting shame I gave a startled shriek of horror. *I had seen Michael clearly for the first time since the burning of the Idourska Palace.*

"Oh, God, how awful," I cried, "I can't look at you I can't bear it, I can't, I can't! It is worse than what we have left," I sobbed.

Michael slowly turned and stood without a word with his back to me, he leant against a tree, his head upon his arms.

I sobbed wildly, madly, hysterically, sobs such as had never been wrung from me before in my life.

Suddenly, after the first shock, I realized what a beast I was. Instantly I was kneeling beside him in the snow, clutching at him with my arms, imploring him to forgive me.

"I forgive you, Bracova."

Again and again I pleaded, "Forgive me; oh, forgive me, Michael, dear Michael, master."

"Bracova, for the love of God never call me master again."

"I referred to our art, yours and mine, no, yours alone, for mine doesn't exist beside you." I spoke wildly, foolishly, brokenly, I neither knew what I was saying or what I was doing.

"Spare me that, at least," he said. "It is over, don't —don't speak of it to me. I should have told you," the husky voice continued. "*But I do not know the worst myself yet.*

"Bracova, little Bracova!"

"Yes, Michael?"

"Turn the light of the lantern away from me. Examine these passports and papers and those maps we took. Tell me what they are."

"They are two Soviet command passes and their order papers, extending as far as Ustuig."

"On a deflected route for Archangel?"

"Yes."

"The maps, can you read them?"

"Clearly, they show a rough route of the stretches of forests, steppes, some lakes, and a long river."

"Anything else?"

"Rough red crosses to indicate scattered villages, or huts, or dwellings, I know not which."

"Collect all the money and count it, Bracova."

I collected it all from the big pockets of our coats, where we had thrust it before our flight from our stable prison. In rouble notes, gold and silver, it amounted to a far bigger sum than I had ever dreamed.

"Wrap the gold within the notes, and hide all of it inside our boots."

"Are the revolvers loaded? Examine them."

"Yes, they are army ones, both fully loaded."

"Hide one in my inside pocket and one in your own."

"Yes, Michael."

"You have your knife in the other pocket?"

"Aye."

"Now thread the butcher's knife, that delivered us both, in and out through the left inside lining of my coat, right up to the hilt, so that I can draw it in case of need.

"You know we may never live to do the journey, little Bracova, we are lost already."

"Yes, Michael, I know."

"The money may help us to purchase food, if we can

reach any habitation. It will be the only means of buying our way out of the country.

"Remember especially only to use the silver, as you value what is left of our lives, the people are desperate, starving."

"Yes."

"Let me do any bargaining there is to be done."

"I will, and we may get through, Michael."

"Perhaps."

"Shall we journey on again, Michael, and keep the lantern alight for a guide? Although we know not where we are going."

"In a few minutes, but there is one other thing you must do."

"What is it, Michael?"

"Take out your knife again, and cut away the leather lining inside my hat, also cut away and unravel some of the braid from the coat, two long pieces of braid will do. That's it, bend the strip of leather lining double, now pierce a hole at either end and tie a length of braid firmly through each hole."

I obeyed each direction.

"Tie it firmly round my head over my eye this side—no, leave the lantern on the ground, I will guide your hand with my arm here."

Carefully I did as I was bid.

"You will have to do things for me, Bracova, because—*because I cannot any longer use my hands*."

Michael had said he did not know the worst, and I was but beginning to learn.

* * * *

One long, bitter year and seven months, by the calendar, it took us to reach England. What need to tell of it all; it would be but a repetition of constant crafty words and deeds, to get free; of skulking, and hiding, of lying, thieving, and every form of trickery, of bargaining and corruption, without end. Of months of weary waiting at Archangel, with all Soviet badges and papers discarded now.

Waiting, always waiting, to be taken away, by one vessel or another, claiming to be British citizens.

All the money gone, save only enough to purchase

at last, seven times over, our passage in a tramp steamer from Archangel to a port in England called Hull.

Never could I have done it by myself without Michael, for his was the brain, up to a time, that saw us through to deliver us.

* * * *

With a little food in our knapsacks, but almost penniless, we crept, the night we landed, into a lighted église, (no, Michael says it is called a church) in the city of Hull, in England.

Beside each other we kneeled, I was so very weary and it seemed so peaceful and safe.

The people within were singing softly, and to me how soothingly, a mass (no, Michael says they call it a hymn). I heard all the words which they sang.

"We are but little children weak
And some of us of low estate."

I, Bracova, felt but as a little child and assuredly I was very weak, and both of us were now of low estate.

My tears fell fast upon the stone floor upon which we knelt, fell for a long, long while, although with a full heart I was trying to give thanks.

Long after the people had gone we still knelt there side by side, until one stood before us in a black robe, (I learn it is called a cassock).

"You have travelled very far," he said.

"Yes," I answered.

"And have suffered much."

"Yes."

"You have lived through terrible bloodshed."

"Yes."

"As true children of God you have returned to give thanks to Him for His great mercies."

"We are here, that is enough."

"My son, do you speak always for your companion?"

"Yes, always now, do not question him. God had partly drawn a curtain over his sufferings."

"Our Heavenly Father's blessing and peace upon you both," he said, ere he left us.

I always answered for Michael now, for he too had mercifully become even as a little child.

So we continued to kneel for awhile upon the stones of the church, and my hand was holding Michael's.

His hand was so cold, and my heart was so heavy.

* * * *

From time to time, whilst I have been writing, I have observed and watched Michael moving about this strange room which must once have been so glorious.

I saw him drop upon his knees and hold an old needlework covering to his lips. It is a covering thrown over a resplendent bed. When I passed it a faint odour of violets seemed to cling about it.

Perhaps it was associated with the woman he had loved so well.

Did Michael realize, gentle, lovable, childlike as he had become, that she had returned safely? I doubted it but wondered if it could be so.

The evidence of her return was the famous violin case upon the table.

Had the Princess not escaped, who could have brought it there? She, too, must have known of this secret room.

"Have you nearly finished, Bracova?" Michael asked.

"Very nearly now, Michael." But at intervals I continued writing. I must write on in bits as best I can now until we go.

"Michael, tell me, if all these beautiful things here are yours and belong to you, why need we go out to wander again?"

"Not mine," Michael answered. "No, no, not mine, they were—were——"

"Yes, Michael?"

"No longer mine, they were given away."

"Given away; oh, Michael! To whom were they given?"

He shook his head, then quite suddenly he placed his hand upon the violin case with its long golden clasps. He fumbled at the fastenings and they snapped open.

"This is mine," he said. "Yes, this case and my violin, and bow," and he started to wrap them up in a long piece of maroon-coloured silk.

"Michael," I answered unsteadily, "what use will it be, you cannot play it."

He shook his head again. "*I can't*," he said, "*but I will*."

Leaving the violin and bow wrapped up in the long piece of mulberry-coloured silk, he wandered across to an old lacquer box and lifted the lid.

I followed to see what he was gazing at so earnestly.

He took out what looked like an old bill, and two English five pound notes.

"Are those yours also, Michael?"

"Yes, yes," he handed them to me at once.

"If we leave here, where shall we go with this money, Michael?"

"To Paris."

"Why Paris, Michael?"

"I know; do as I say, little Bracova; and there is something else, too, you can do, for your hands are strong."

"What is it, Michael?"

"Take your knife and get off the hinges of this violin case, and see, slip out all those sliding tops to the little boxes inside."

"Michael, why deface it?"

"They are of pure gold, we shall need it."

Slowly I stripped the beautiful case of all its gold fittings.

"Put them into your pocket, little Bracova. Will they not help us?"

"Yes, Michael, yes."

* * * *

We are about to pass out into the night by the way we came. Under his arm Michael holds the bundle of mulberry-coloured silk enwrapping the violin and bow.

He is standing silently looking at the pages I have written, up to now turning them over one by one without attempting to read them.

Something within me, some strange instinct made me say:

"Michael, I shall be with you in Paris, always with you. I shall never leave you."

He replaced the manuscript, now all but finished, upon the table, and laughed lightly and gaily as he crossed to the old stone fireplace.

"Oh, no!" he said.

"Michael, why do you say that?"

He gazed wistfully around the room, upon all its beauty that must have been so familiar to him. Then a gleam of the once bright intelligence seemed to come back to him for a few moments.

"They think me dead, it is better so."

He spoke the words so quietly, as if accepting something he welcomed.

"Yes, it is better so," he continued. "I can lose myself."

"Michael, I will not hear you say that. I will never go away from you."

"Hush boy, you have your work to do, be thankful for that.

"Bracova."

"Yes."

"At the end of the manuscript I want you to write something."

"Yes, Michael."

"Write——" He remained silent so long I thought that he must have forgotten.

"Yes, Michael, I am waiting. What shall I write?"

"The Autobiography of a Blackguard."

"Blackguard?" I queried.

"Yes, the French 'blageur'. Now add the date, and the year 1919."

"Is that all, Michael?"

"Yes, close the book and leave it upon the table.

"Come Bracova."

BOOK II

Lord Anthony Peversdoun finished reading amidst a dead silence.

Professor McGrath wiped his eyeglasses that seemed to have become strangely misty.

Sir Andrew Calmath sat forward in his chair with his head sunk within his hands.

The Marquis de Villemont asked in a voice strangely unlike his usually clear and steady tone; "So that is the end?"

The Duc de Choiseuil spoke for the first time; his words were perceptibly affected by some deep emotion; he appeared to jerk them out by a great effort.

"It is not the end," he said. "My God, no. I am the only one here who knows the end."

Without speaking the others waited for him to continue. The Duc de Choiseuil rose and paced up and down the room several times.

He might have been endeavouring to regain his usual composure, or perhaps he was merely trying to fit certain incidents in the manuscript together like a puzzle.

"I had better tell you," he said at length, "certain things that little Bracova with his gentleness would not describe, and other things that Bracova has never known.

"Somewhere about the year of 1920 a strange figure could be seen and heard, but only after nightfall, about some of the streets of Paris. A side street leading off the Place de l'Opera was as a rule the spot where this curious personage could be seen at night. The figure was that of a man whose age it would have been impossible to tell. Shabbily dressed he was, but always clean. Some sort of respectability clung about him, despite the old floppy hat covering iron-grey hair and clothes all but worn out. Moreover, he never asked for alms or money in any way.

"There were many wrecks to be seen in Paris, as well as other great cities, after the ravage and wastage of war. Indeed it must have seemed to the people of Paris as if this man was assuredly one of them.

"Everyone appeared to treat him with a sort of silent respect, few passed him in those evening hours without giving him at least some little money.

"A broad black patch covered one eye, that was without doubt sightless. Terrible scars, as from some awful fire or explosion, disfigured much of what could be seen of his face.

"His body was twisted in some way from one shoulder to his leg. Two strangely scarred hands that had become withered claws, grasped a violin and bow.

"How he could even play I do not know, but he did by some method that could only have been known to himself.

"I said just now he could be seen and heard. Well, the sound of that violin could only just be heard. It resembled if anything, a musical box, the cylinder of which is broken in many places. Sometimes a few notes of clear melody and then a blurr, as if the mechanism or a spring had snapped.

"Some lightning stroke of the gods had shattered this seemingly poor old man's body, and it had shattered his playing at the same time.

"I passed one night with the Painter. We gave the old violin player some small money. He never seemed to speak to anybody, and we passed on.

"I remember the Painter shivered slightly as he said to me, 'Some fragment of what that old fellow was trying to play, somehow reminded me of one of those things Michael used to play so divinely. Poor Michael, murdered in Russia.'

"No further comment was made.

"One evening I noticed the strange figure, carrying his violin and bow in a green bag, enter one of the little wine shops near the Opera House. Out of sheer curiosity I entered afterwards, ordered something myself, and from a short distance off watched him unobserved. The owner of the wine-shop seemed to know the old chap and treat him with even a certain amount of respect.

"He had served his strange customer with a glass of Cognac, and I heard the musician of the streets speak for the first time.

"In a voice that had a sort of hoarseness in it, but in a gentle tone and quite refined accent, he said, 'Grand'-mère's medicine'.

"'Yes,' agreed the wine-shop keeper, as if he had

heard the remark before. 'And good medicine, too, is it not?'

"'Yes, very, she always took it. I take it now sometimes.'

"'Yes, yes,' agreed the patron consolingly, 'but not so much as she took it?'

"'Oh, no—not so much—only a little.'

"'Will you have your second and third glass to-night?'

"'Yes, perhaps.'

"'It warms you and cheers you up, doesn't it?'

"'Yes.'

"'You played at concerts once, didn't you?'

"'Oh, yes—in the other life.'

"The wine-shop keeper quietly pushed back the money for the third little glass of Cognac. The old musician hesitated and looked puzzled, 'I don't want you to pay for this one,' explained the owner, 'you are drinking this one with me.'

"'Yes, I see. Thank you.'

"At this moment a woman who was paying at the counter dropped a franc piece out of her hand. It rolled along the floor and disappeared beneath one of the high and heavy empty wooden barrels placed against the end wall of the little wine-shop.

"'You have lost it now,' said the wine-store keeper. 'You must wait for it until they remove the barrel in the morning.'

"The woman did not seem to care in any way about her trifling loss. Yet my own astonishment was profound when I saw the shabby figure of the street violinist press his shoulder and leg against the barrel and move it along the wall with scarcely any effort.

"He picked up the franc piece and gave it to the woman.

"'Aren't you strong,' the wine-shop keeper said admiringly.

"'No. It is an empty barrel.'

"'But it takes three of us to move it.'

"The old musician made no reply.

"I sat still, and I was amazed, for it was not an old man I was watching, as I had supposed, but a young man, and moreover one who must once have been very strong and wonderful.

"I rose and left the place.

"'Poor devil,' I said to myself, 'poor devil. Was it

an explosion or some mine during the war that shattered you? I wonder. What could you have been like before, when you had your full height, your physical strength, in addition most likely, physical beauty as well.

"'The lust of war and its carnage, has much to answer for,' I mused bitterly.

"The next time I was destined to see him, and the last, was the night when, amidst a little group of people, I bent over him together with a hospital nurse, and we lifted him as tenderly as we could, to be taken to the hospital.

"A careless Parisian taxi-driver, and there are none so careless in any city, had run over the street violinist as he was crossing the road.

"Yes, tenderly we lifted him, and accompanied him to the hospital. The poor fellow was moaning terribly. The car had passed over him and injured him very badly.

"I think some of his ribs must have been crushed from the pain he was suffering. At the vestibule of the hospital I gave my card to the nurse with whom I had helped to bring him in, telling her I would call next day to see if I could do anything for him and see how he was.

"The nurse, I remembered afterwards, had looked at me very fixedly beneath the white coif she wore above her eyes, and shrouding her head, before she bowed and passed on into the hospital.

"The following evening, after dinner, my manservant entered the dining-room of my flat in the Avenue Malakof and said a lady desired to see me, a nurse.

"The nurse was shown in, and after the man had withdrawn she quietly removed the white coif from her head.

"Changed as she was, I stretched out both my hands to greet her. My visitor was Marie Princess Idourska of Russia.

"Without a word she sank into a chair beside the still spread dinner table and sobbed bitterly. The same great grief that had robbed from her face something of its beauty, was shaking her now from head to foot.

"I poured her out some wine, yet for a long time she found it impossible to speak to me.

"'Marie, dear Princess,' I urged, 'why are you here, dressed like this? What is the nature of the great trouble you are in? Tell me, Marie, let me help you if I can.'

"'Only a Princess in name,' she said, 'I have been a

hospital nurse since the beginning of 1914. Afterwards I lost all in the Revolution.'

"Yes, yes, I know, but there is nothing that I will not do for you; what after all are lands, estates, money?'

"'I meant love when I said all, I lost, as I thought, the man I loved.'

"'Michael?'

"She nodded.

"'As you thought?' I queried.

"'Yes, listen to what I have to tell you, Raoul. Last night, although you did not recognize me, you helped and accompanied me whilst they took a badly hurt man, a dying man, to the hospital. He was not put in the ward I attend.

"'During the night, however, I went to his bedside to visit him. That night had been my evening off duty, and underneath my outer cloak I still wore a necklace I greatly prize and oft-times wear with a crucifix attached to it. Only a very small portion of the necklace was visible.

"'After awhile, as I watched beside his bed, the man asked me what it was. I answered it was a necklace given to me by the one I had loved best in all the world. Shortly afterwards he told me he thought he was dying, and asked me if I believed so, too. I told him, yes, for I had read the card over his head. "Will you kiss me before I die?" he asked.

"'Yes, brother,' I answered. 'I have many a kiss given to my brave soldiers who needed a woman's love and care to take them upon their last journey.

"'Gently and tenderly I bent over the scarred face and kissed him upon his lips, and then prayed over him that God would care for him and comfort him and ease all his pain.

"'"Stay with me a little," he pleaded.

"'So I stayed awhile.

"'"Have you any message to leave, anything to say or write?" I asked him.

"'He nodded.

"'I brought him a pencil and paper and placed a book for him to write upon, for he could not be lifted or moved.

"'I had to leave him then, for I was called away to duty in my own ward.

"'The next morning when I came off duty, I went to the other ward to see him. He had died quite quietly in the night, the nurse in charge told me. "At the last he asked me to give this to you."

"'Then the nurse handed me this piece of paper.'

"The Princess Marie was sobbing again in a way that wrung my heart. That sobbing was so utterly hopeless, heart-broken beyond anything I have ever heard.

"Brokenly, and bit by bit, amidst the outpouring of her terrible grief, she said, 'The man who died last night, was the man who gave his life to save me that night in Russia; far more he gave than his life, for he was tortured and worse than crucified, for me. It was Michael Caviol, the man I love, who died last night,' she wept.

"'Impossible,' I said, 'Michael died in Russia.'

"'No, no, something happened to him that awful night when he saved me. Raoul, you and I have seen him, we can only imagine what horror it could have been that mutilated and destroyed his lovely face and form. Oh, Dear God!' she wailed, 'I cannot bear it, I cannot bear it.'

"'Marie, dear Marie,' I urged, 'you have made some strange mistake, you must be wrong. You are overworked, over-done, this thing is impossible.'

"For answer, she handed me a crumpled piece of notepaper, the name of the hospital was printed upon the top.

"Underneath, scrawled in pencil, with how much pain and difficulty none perhaps will know, were these words:

"'Where—are—you—going—Michael?

"'I—don't—know.

"'You—found—love—Michael?

"'Yes—it—was—greater——

"'than—Maliol's—gift.'

"I was convinced. I bowed my head. I am not ashamed to own I wept with her.

"'He knew I was there,' she sobbed. 'He wouldn't have me know who he was, he wouldn't let me know all he had given for me, what he had become for my sake.

"'Raoul, think, think! What it must have cost him to keep silent. Oh, Michael, Michael! My heart is broken.'

"It was true, I think her heart was broken, or the shock must have killed her. The little Princess Marie died two weeks afterwards.

"They were buried side by side in the Pierre-la-Chaise cemetery in Paris.

"I saw that a fitting monument was placed above them, with only their initials carved upon it.

"Before she died she left me three things. One was a very solemn charge, also the ancient and valuable necklace she prized so much, to be used for a certain purpose, and lastly the violin Michael had played until the last.

"It had been broken, but it was still tightly clasped in his hand that night they had removed him to the hospital.

"I recognized it at once, it was the Gasparo da Salo violin he had always treasured, having at the back of it the diamond-shaped piece of ebony inlaid.

"Yes, dear little Princess, whom Michael had loved so well, whom everybody loved, even as I myself have loved you, none of us could give you your heart's desire.

"I had no power to heal your broken heart, no measure of comfort to wipe away your tears. The sound of your sobbing will ring in my ears always, when I think of what you told me that night."

The Duc de Choiseuil ceased speaking, for some seconds there was a dead silence in the room.

Then the silence was broken by a strange deep sound.

Were our nerves and imaginations over-strained or were we indeed listening to the unmistakable sound of someone sobbing.

In a startled silence, broken only by those sobs we could all of us hear, we looked at one another.

Then we rose in a body and made for the end of the room from where the sounds proceeded. We pulled back a tall screen standing at the end of the room. There before us, with his head bowed upon a table, a man was sobbing, oblivious to anything else, overcome by a grief that strong men seldom give way to.

"Carter! Good Heavens! Carter, of all people," burst from the Marquis de Villemont.

"No, Cator, gentlemen," he cried. "Nicolo Cator, the man who loved Master Michael so, loved him since he was a tiny little boy. Nicolo Cator, who betrayed his trust."

We all stood speechless and silent before this man's grief.

"Oh, gentlemen, forgive me for listening. Hidden here, night after night, I have heard it all. Heaven forgive me, for I shall never forgive myself, I shall never be forgiven. Master Michael made over all his money to me, this house, everything, in trust for the Princess.

"He never told me when he did all this, how dangerous his mission was to be in Russia; he said good-bye to me and I never saw him again.

"Gentlemen, I came home, I kept all for him as he would have had me keep it, for her.

"Then, after perilous adventures and a hazardous journey, the Princess came here. The Princess did not tell me all, but she told me a great deal, and so we waited long, dreadful months. Expecting him, longing for his return. Then at last, slowly, scraps of news from Russia began to come through to England, and among them the awful tidings that the Idourska Palace had been burned and sacked, and that everybody within it had been either massacred or burned alive.

"The Princess heard of the murder of her aunt the Grand Duchess Vassilli and many of the other shocking details, and she never lifted up her pretty head again. She seemed to be stricken, the same as I was, stricken with the grief and horror of it.

"We both believed Master Michael had died that night to save her. With a white face she would tell me how she had left three of them in a room whilst Michael closed the door for her to escape, and prevented the Prince Paul Alexis from following her. Over and over again she would ask me what could have happened to Michael afterwards. No one, she declared, would injure Master Michael in Russia, the people almost worshipped him.

"Gentlemen I couldn't answer her questions. I did not know myself, and I could find no hope or comfort for either of us.

"Then one night about nine o'clock she sent for me in this very room. The Princess seemed wild and white, and startled, full of fear she seemed. 'Nicolo,' she said, 'I have heard the violin being played to-night.'

"'Princess, what can you mean?' I asked. 'In there,' she cried, 'in there,' she seemed to me to point to the stone fireplace, and I thought that grief had affected her brain, for I did not know of the secret rooms. 'I will never go in there again,' she said. 'I was in there and I

heard it quite plainly. It was Michael playing, I tell you,' she cried, 'your master. Do you suppose I could mistake his playing? Nicolo, Michael is dead,' and then she just fainted upon the floor.

"So it came about that she would not remain in St. Freeda's Priory, nor would she take any of the money that was left to me in trust for her."

"'I am going away, Nicolo,' she said, 'I can no longer bear to live in the house of the man I have loved, nor will I have anything to do with the money he has left for me. It would be like blood money, for he died to save me.'

"'Princess,' I implored, 'do not leave me alone with such a burden.'

"'It is yours, Nicolo,' she told me, 'yours, not mine. I want nothing but the man I love, that would have been my wedded husband; but he is dead, Nicolo, I know it, and I have now *a greater tie, a deeper duty elsewhere.*'

"So the Princess went away."

"One year and six months in all I stayed here, eating out my heart with grief for Master Michael, for all hope had left me now, I knew he would never return.

"One evening as I sat in this very room, I seemed to hear the sounds of a violin. It sounded as if it were being beautifully played as Master Michael used to play it.

"I felt I couldn't bear any more. All the money Master Michael had entrusted to me was banked. I never touched a penny of it, I couldn't."

The Duc de Choiseuil moved a little nearer to Cator for the first time, and regarded him with an even closer attention than he had done hitherto.

"I could bear the house no longer gentlemen, to me it was haunted, yes haunted, by the loved memory of Master Michael, and haunted by the sound of the violin I believed I had heard played, and dreaded to hear again.

"I sold the house in another name, made it over to the agents, deeds and all, I never inquired who had bought it. All the money I banked as well, for any heirs Master Michael might have, yet I knew that he could have none.

"So I took to service again with a good master. Then one day when that master told me to pack up and join him at St. Freeda's Priory, I felt as if I should die.

"I was so upset that I dropped a valuable blue Ming bowl I was holding to fill with flowers. The only thing I could do was to replace them with the two valuable blue

Ming bowls Master Michael had given me."

The Marquis de Villemont nodded. One mystery was explained at any rate.

"Then gentlemen, when I came here again, I heard that manuscript read, the true history of dear Master Michael's life."

Here Cator utterly broke down.

"I was here in the house two months before he came back, when he needed me," he sobbed, "shattered, half sightless, his lovely face, his beautiful hands, gone, gone and I was not here to welcome him. Oh woe to me, bitter, bitter unending woe and remorse, for I had betrayed my trust.

"That manuscript of his life has cut me to the heart.

"'The Autobiography of a Blackguard?' No—No—No the Autobiography of a great gentleman; I am the blackguard, yes, God forgive me for that, for I did not mean to be."

Three of the four men standing around Cator had been too much absorbed to notice that the Duc de Choiseuil had given a quiet order to a servant who had entered the room and departed quickly.

Nobody in the room appeared aware of anything happening until the door immediately facing us was opened and two persons entered the room.

A homely-looking woman was leading and holding by the hand a singularly beautiful little boy about six years of age or there-abouts.

De Villemont, Calmath and McGrath alone seemed surprised at the appearance, none of them being aware that there was such a thing as a child in the house.

Cator's head had been bowed over the table, slowly he raised it and saw the child.

Then a wonderful light came into his eyes, his arms went out, "Michael, oh Michael!" he cried.

The little fellow ran straight into those outstretched arms, and wound his chubby fingers round Cator's neck.

"The solemn charge I had," murmured the Duc de Choiseuil.

"Michael Caviol never knew, and she was waiting and longing to tell him this in England and to marry him, but Michael Caviol was trying to fight his way out of Russia, and she believed him to be dead."

AMONG OURSELVES

BOOK III

Six months afterwards, by mutual arrangement, De Villemont, De Choiseuil, MaGrath and Peversdoun, all came to stay at St Freeda's Priory. One other member had been added to the party.

Through the open stone archway leading from the Refectory Room (for there were no longer any secret rooms, both being now connected by a short open stone passage, that a child could run along easily) came the sound of a violin being beautifully played.

The Allegro of the Mendelssohn Concerto played with a rare brio, and at an amazing speed, was showering out its tripping silvery cascade of notes.

"Bracova" commented Calmath, "glad he's here, fine artiste, and gets better and better every year. I conducted for him at the Queen's Hall last week. Of course he will never play as Michael played, but he is very fine."

Nicolo Cator appeared and was duly asked how his especial charge was getting on.

"Master Michael is just bonny, gentlemen. He is a dear little chap, but he has one terribly unfortunate habit, gentlemen, we can't get him out of."

"Shouldn't think it could be very serious or ineradicable at his time of life. What is it?" demanded Calmath.

"Well Sir Andrew, Master Michael *will* turn on the water taps in the house, whenever he has a chance."

The men present laughed good-humouredly as they lit their cigars.

"Flooded the kitchen yesterday before we found out," continued Cator. "Last week he turned on a water tap in the cellar, which resembled a swimming bath."

"Perhaps he intends to be an engineer," ventured McGrath.

"I hope so sir," answered Cator, "I do hope he will be something useful, and not an artiste."

Sir Andrew Calmath coughed.

"He can't abide any sort of music, sir. A man came into the grounds the other day with an accordion and a monkey. Master Michael nearly screamed the place down."

"That was probably the monkey," suggested Peversdoun.

"No my lord, he quite made friends with the monkey, it was the accordion he couldn't stand."

"I really cannot see that a dislike to the accordion shows in any way a lack of the love of music," observed Sir Andrew Calmath.

"Look out, Cator, he's at it again," exclaimed the Duc de Choiseuil, who happened to be standing near the long windows. "He's turned on the water tap on the terrace."

Cator literally ran from the room; it was the first time Cator had ever been known to run.

The men crowded round the windows and observed with some amusement a small holland-clad figure becoming drenched in the centre of an increasing fountain, bigger than himself, devised by the gardener for the watering of the lawns.

"Little beggar," laughed Peversdoun.

We saw him caught up and placed upon Cator's shoulders, and a very wet but otherwise stately procession marched into the house.

"No, Master Michael, it's very wrong," we heard Cator expostulating.

"I like turning on water taps Cay-torr."

"Yes, but Master Michael, you can't do everything you like."

"Why not?"

Cator hedged, "In this instance, Master Michael, do you know what you have done?"

"Yes, made a fountain."

"Apart from that, Master Michael, you have made yourself wet through and will have to be changed, you've made me wet through also, the water is running down my neck and I shall have to change as well. Master Michael, I'm very upset."

"Oh poor Cay-torr," cooed a happy but unrepentant voice.

"I will tell you fellows," explained Peversdoun, "what Raoul and myself have arranged. As you know, we are each going to be married very shortly. Raoul has found in Nicolo an ideal guardian for the kid, and we shall all

remain his god-fathers, Bracova included, who is so fond of little Michael that he even condescends to imitate the bagpipes for him upon his violin.

"Anyway I don't want this house. I have unfortunately already a castle, a shooting box and two other houses, and as I don't like the idea of taking the house away from the kid and Nicolo, I have agreed to choose such pictures as I want instead of theprice I paid to purchase St. Freeda's, and it goes back to Nicolo and the boy."

"That's a sound arrangement," agreed de Villemont.

"I think so. Raoul and myself fetched a first-class London dealer down the other day, paid his fee, and he values the contents of the two rooms yonder at what do you fellows suppose?"

"Impossible to guess," said Calmath.

"One hundred and fifty thousand pounds."

"Phew!" a sort of low whistle of astonishment went round the room.

"After that piece of information I had a talk with Nicolo, and suggested selling the collection for the ultimate benefit of himself and the boy."

"I haven't been idle either," said the Duc de Choiseuil. "The necklace the Princess left me to dispose of for the benefit of little Michael can also be sold for a fabulous price."

"With the small fortune Michael Caviol made over to Nicolo after his South American tour, the boy will come into a handsome fortune by the time he grows up. He will have everything in the way of the best education England can give him into the bargain."

"I can never forget," remarked De Villemont, "how I misjudged Cator, or Carter as I always used to call him."

"Wonderful man," Peversdoun declared. "The little Michael loves him as much as the other Michael did."

"By the way McGrath, where have you been hiding yourself for months?"

The Professor polished his eyeglasses and retorted. "Not hiding myself, I have been making open inquiries about a subject that absorbed me; in Marseilles and other places upon the Continent."

"Is the subject a secret?" inquired Calmath.

"No, I wanted to get to the bottom of the mystery that seemed to surround Michael Caviol and his history of

Maliol. It fascinated me to such a degree I determined to do so."

"And did you, Professor?" Everybody present seemed to ask the question at once.

"I did, and in a thorough and scientific manner. The first thing I did was to visit the newspaper publishing offices of two of the chief papers in the town of Marseilles. I spent a considerable time, poring over those back files which they keep swung upon poles and chains, in order to discover if there was any sort of description of a circus in the year I wanted."

"What on earth did you want to find out about a circus for?" Calmath ventured to ask.

"Because that is when all the trouble started."

The men gathered around, stared at the Professor blankly.

McGrath continued speaking almost as if he was delivering an unusually interesting lecture to a group of students.

"The real trouble, of course, actually started when that old beast of a woman hit Michael Caviol, then a little boy, over the head with a Cognac bottle.

"Physically and psychologically, after that blow, he would be very subject to impressions, sensitively subject to them. The brain might, as I well know, morbidly retain any such first impression, whether scene, picture, accident, or happening.

"All I had to discover was what had impressed him first. Why, the circus. He sat at the door when first trying to get well and recorded that one car particularly attracted his attention.

"I luckily found a full description in those bygone pages of that particular car.

"It was arranged as a desert, a man dressed like an Egyptian god, of tall and handsome aspect, dominated the car, and at his feet crouched a huge black panther.

"That," said the Professor solemnly, "was the first real vision of Maliol and his attendant, that Michael had."

The men seated round the room were so interested they even forgot to smoke. Their cigars had gone out.

"I continued searching those papers and found what I had expected to find, namely, that the circus had been in the city for a long time.

"Some weeks previously, 'Black Bertha,' as the black

panther was named, had escaped for a night and a day, before being led back again, a quite willing captive, to her proper circus home. Her teeth and claws had doubtless been treated and rendered harmless.

"Black Bertha, according to descriptions, was a most tractable and good-tempered beast considering she was commonly supposed to be a wild animal. She was sensitive to music, preferred the band to any other part of the circus, and so friendly with children, that the offsprings of the circus owner could play with her.

"This dear and delightful panther was recaptured at another corner further down the Rue Notte, some little way past Michael's old house.

"The old hag and Levinski, poring over a book of black magic, had believed they had produced the creature.

"Black Bertha had simply jumped the low outside wall of the little yard, and had followed Michael in unobserved in the darkness, for remember the room was practically in darkness, and seeing the child, probably wanted to make friends, and had followed him upstairs.

"Afterwards in the confusion when the two people downstairs left the yard door open, it left the same way by which it came.

"No black magic, no need for Michael's childish terror. Yet the idea of the black panther remained, because he had seen it inside that car in the circus procession.

"We now come to Levinski and his book—the weird and horrible sailor, and his magic stone; for all three are so harmlessly yet closely associated that they would be laughable but for the dire linking of the lot in Michael's over-sensitive brain, that led in the end to the consummation of a truly awful tragedy.

"I found the owner of Levinski's book," announced the Professor; "yes, and I talked with him in his villa for a long time. He was a famous dealer in rare and precious stones.

"The book was one of a set of five, and fortunately very rare, dealing with an unusual and unpleasant subject, black magic, devil worship, and the temporary materialization of spiritual bodies and demons.

"The lost book happened to be volume two and quite useless by itself, without volumes one and three. Anyway it was stolen from the jewel merchant. Part of it was

written in Latin, some of it in old English. Levinski could read both languages.

"Levinski was a charlatan, and thought he had discovered a new world which might bring him fame and riches.

"Whoever stole the book sold it to one of the second-hand bookshops off the quays.

"Levinski bought it there.

"A large reward was offered by the owner for the recovery of the book. This reward was advertised broadcast. I have seen one of the bills, and the very large sum of money promised for its recovery attracted the attention and excited the cupidity of Miguelez, the half-caste Portuguese sailor.

"Oh yes, I know his name and all about him; he was not a visitant from either Heaven or hell, although I should imagine he possessed a marked leaning towards the latter place.

"It is certain this sailor knew nothing about Maliol.

"But he knew his world very well indeed, did Miguelez.

"He employed his time when upon shore by trying to intimidate weak women, who happened to have money, into buying worthless moonstones and opals. He would ask a ridiculously high price after relating tales to them of their exotic value.

"He would recount legendary stories concerning them, all of which he got out of a book and committed to memory; upon other occasions he appears to have improvised as he went along.

"I think myself his best improvisation, which I did not find in his book, took place in the parlour kitchen of the Rue Notte, whilst Michael listened and hid behind the door.

"When the reward was offered for the book, Miguelez soon found out the shop off the quay where it had been sold, and easily discovered who had bought it.

"You already know by Michael's manuscript how he got possession of it again.

"But none of you know the sequel of Maliol's supposed messenger.

"He took the book back to the owner and received the large reward. Not content with this, he had the audacity to produce a worthless moonstone, and recount, to the vast amusement of the dealer in precious stones,

the self-same story, with a few variations, that Michael had overheard the day before.

"The dealer laughed at him, and bade him be gone.

"Nothing supernatural in this, particularly material, not to say sordid.

"The appearance of this sailor in the Idourska Palace, when poor Michael recognized him, and fully believed his doom was upon him, was a matter of pure chance.

"The sailors from many vessels in Russian ports had mutinied about that time, and joined the Communists.

"This man Miguelez was among them, and I should think merely joined in for any loot that he might be able to get, irrespective of any cause, and utterly indifferent as to the number of lives that he might sacrifice in pursuit of his object.

"Scientifically and without any vestige of doubt we have cause and effect exemplified, in an exact sequence alike singular and fully significant.

"The blow upon Michael's head.

"The image he afterwards calls Maliol, and the attendant beast, appear in the circus car.

"Any great strain, excitement, or effort, was followed always, although at intervals, by this vision once conceived.

"After the excitement of the escape from Marseilles and Paris, and his long journey, we get 'The Forbidden Dance of the Elves'.

"Similarly, after the strain of excessant training and competing for the Gold Medal at Warsaw, occurs again the vision of Maliol and the butterflies, known as the strange composition 'Papillions'.

"Years elapse before there comes a repetition of this vision, which is the last appearance of the supposed Maliol, though not alas, that of his presumed messenger.

"What condition of excitement brings this last and most terrible of all the visions about?

"Michael has been living for weeks at the very highest pitch of excitement, and of love.

"The fact of Michael finding Prince Idourska stealthily creeping into his house at night, believing the woman he loved to be in jeopardy, the subsequent struggle with Prince Idourska, would be more than sufficient to again produce the dream phenomena, taken in conjunction with the belief of those other visions which had so dominated his life.

"With regard to the supposed emissary of Maliol—the giant sailor Miguelez—we can only imagine and shudder at what Michael's feelings must have been when this man advanced up the stairway of the burning Idourska Palace that night.

"Michael was very brave, but a deep-rooted belief in a terrible superstition had paralysed him. Against this he was powerless and could take no action to save himself, if only for a while.

"I should like to mention that I interviewed both Moritz Liebner, also Michael's old master at Warsaw, Chenstokhov, and last but not least, Pomponard.

"Pomponard has a vineyard now in Spain. He has retired with a small fortune he made out of doing Michael's business, for Michael gave him a handsome percentage.

"Old Pomponard grieved over Michael's death which he believed took place in Russia; he thought he had been killed during a rising. I had not the heart to undeceive the old fellow. I could not tell him the true story, it would have spoiled the rest of his life.

"All these men, so different in art, temperament, and imagination, believed Michael to be the finest violinist they had heard in the world.

"I asked the great Liebner if he considered there was anything suggesting the supernatural about Michael's playing.

"The great master laughed the idea to scorn.

"Liebner stated that he had been enabled, by reason of Michael's gifts, to train and perfect him, in a way that had never been possible with any other violinist.

"He considered Michael's brain most vivid and wonderful, but declared that any great shock, or terrible suffering, might temporarily unhinge it.

"The night Michael thought he was losing the power to play the violin, Calmath here, will tell you he played as beautifully as ever he did."

Sir Andrew Calmath nodded.

"If any irrefutable proof is needed to show that Michael was no more under the domination of this spirit apparition Maliol, for composition, any more than he was beneath his spell in regard to his singular playing upon the instrument, it is afforded to us by a simple comparison.

"'The Forbidden Dance of the Elves' and the equally strange piece 'Papillions' Michael declared and believed

were written solely under the influence of Maliol.

"Very good—then what about the other two compositions, 'Berceuse', and 'Night in Venice', which were solely under the influence of the tenderest and most enraptured awakening of Love.

"From a musician's point of view these two exquisite things are infinitely finer than their predecessors, although perhaps not so sensational from a technical point of view."

Sir Andrew Calmath nodded his head, this time emphatically.

"We do not know," continued the Professor, "and we shall never know, what became of this stone, which possessed no value whatever, save Michael's strange belief in it.

"However, it is not unreasonable to suppose that poor Michael Caviol, during one of those perfectly lucid moments of remembrance that sometimes returned to him, becoming horrified with the thought of still possessing the fatal thing he believed had wrought his ruin, removed it from his neck and flung it away.

"Most likely as he crossed one of the bridges of Paris; it is not improbable to surmise that the thing reposes in the mud of the Seine until this day.

"I get to my last point, the supposed dread sound of Maliol's gong, heard by both Michael and the Princess.

"I questioned many villagers round about here; at last my efforts were rewarded.

"I found one old villager who was up and about, some while just before dawn, of that time in June.

"He also heard the long unused but great bell of St. Freeda's Priory drop within the tower with a terrific clang. The rust of years had gradually eaten away the metal niches where it hung.

"Michael could have heard about it from his own servants, but he had slept on far into the next day in 'The Treasure Chamber', and could not be found. Afterwards he rushed from the house in search of the Princess.

"The words of Nicolo, about Cator his well-beloved and life-long friend and master, were right. I cannot better them except to explain two already apparent truths.

"Michael Caviol was a Blackguard only in his own eyes, and before the exacting demands of his own conscience.

"I gravely doubt if one of us present here in this room would have acted otherwise than Michael did, in any way,

had we been faced with the same strange circumstances that he had to combat in life.

"Have I convinced you?" demanded the Professor.

The others nodded. There was not a man present who was not convinced.

If only the dead genius himself could have been convinced in his life, before it was too late.

This was the thought in the mind of every man present.

* * * *

"Gentlemen, Master Michael is in bed, and he is quite ready to say good night to you all."

"Well, Cator," Peversdoun enquired, "any more water taps turned on, with the exception of the ones used for his bath?"

"No, my lord—but somehow I haven't the heart to scold him much for it."

"Why, Cator?"

"Well my lord, when you come to think how his mother, aye, and his father, were in that city of Red Horror, a city burning into flames and—and—so—perhaps some instinct tells him water is a desirable and lovely thing."

"Extraordinary psychology," murmured the Professor.

So Cator and Bracova led the way upstairs, and we all followed.

Outside the door of a little lighted room we paused.

Stray wreaths of blue smoke from our cigars wound up in spirals towards the old raftered roof.

Inside the room, a clear small voice could be heard speaking.

"Michael, have you been a good boy to-day?"

"No, very naughty."

"What did you do, Michael?"

"I turned on water taps."

Michael was the son of his father, right enough. The childish voice continued.

"Cay-torr very upset, he scolded Michael."

"Will you ever do it again, Michael?"

"Perhaps."

THE END

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The Autobiography of a Blackguard

A CONTINENTAL ROMANCE